



Restraining an Ally: Israel, the United States, and Iran's Nuclear Program, 2011–2012

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Texas National Security Review: Volume 1, Issue 4 (August 2018)
Print: ISSN 2576-1021 Online: ISSN 2576-1153



In asymmetric alliances, a superior state provides security to a weaker ally, who in exchange surrenders its autonomy to its stronger protector. But what happens when the weaker state's vital interests clash with its stronger ally's preferences? In 2011 and 2012, as Iran continued to develop and harden its nuclear program, Israel feared becoming dependent upon the United States to defend it against this potentially existential threat. To escape this scenario, and to enhance its leverage over the United States, Israel led its principal strategic ally to infer that a unilateral Israeli attack on Iran could be imminent. Israel then attempted to force the United States to realign more closely with Israel's strategic interests and constraints. Determined not to get "chain-ganged" into a conflict, the United States increased its pressure on Iran, but also brought restraining influence to bear on Israel, thus producing one of the tensest chapters in U.S.-Israel relations. The following article explains the outcome of this strategic interaction.

In 2011 and 2012, Israel repeatedly indicated that it was fast approaching the point when it might take unilateral military action against Iran's advancing nuclear program, before Iranian capabilities became resilient to an Israeli attack. In a shift from its previous policy, which characterized Iran's nuclear ambitions as a global challenge, Israel now strongly indicated that it might be forced to take it upon itself to stop Iran's nuclear advances — and that an attack could be imminent. Led and articulated almost exclusively by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak — himself a former prime minister — this new posture created deep

concern in Washington, where it was thought that an Israeli attack could ignite a regional war and jeopardize key U.S. interests. Indeed, Israel had created a war scare, which was designed to enhance its bargaining power with the United States. Israel then tried to leverage its enhanced position to get its senior ally to urgently make an explicit, credible, and binding commitment to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon — by military force if necessary — beyond what President Barack Obama had already stated.¹ Israel effectively attempted to influence, and even force, the United States to realign according to Israeli interests and strategic constraints, thus producing

¹ As a presidential candidate, Barack Obama vowed to "use all elements of American power to pressure Iran" and to "prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon," including through keeping "the threat of military action on the table." See "Transcript: Obama's Speech at AIPAC," *NPR*, June 4, 2008, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91150432>. As president, however, Obama struck a more cautious tone, stating generally, and without explicitly invoking the threat of military action, that no option was off the table. For instance, in late 2011, he said, "I have said repeatedly and I will say it today, we are not taking any options off the table." See "President Obama Holds a Press Conference at the APEC Summit," White House, Nov. 13, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/photos-and-video/video/2011/11/13/president-obama-holds-press-conference-apec-summit?page=12>. According to former Obama adviser Dennis Ross, only in 2012 did the president state publicly that he was determined to prevent the prospect of a nuclear Iran. Until then, the United States had made do with describing Iran's potential nuclearization as "unacceptable." See Dennis Ross, *Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 369.



one of the tensest periods in the history of the two countries' relationship. Drawing on open-source material and original interviews with former senior Israeli and U.S. officials, this article seeks to explain the ultimate outcome of that strategic interaction.

The overarching theme of international relations and foreign affairs pertains to actors' efforts to shape their strategic environment and control outcomes. Alliances are one of the major tools states employ in this regard,² whether to accumulate power, deter adversaries,³ pursue their quest for security in the international system,⁴ or restrain others.⁵ Although all alliances function "in the shadow of war,"⁶ scholars distinguish between two major categories — defensive peacetime alliances and offensive wartime alliances. Whereas peacetime alliances are designed to aggregate military power to deter and prevent aggression, wartime alliances are formed to fight a common adversary. Of course, the same alliance can engage in defensive and offensive missions.⁷

The 19th-century British statesman Lord Palmerston famously asserted that the United Kingdom had neither eternal allies nor perpetual enemies but eternal and perpetual interests.⁸ Indeed, at the core of alliance politics is the fact that no two states, including close allies, share eternal, perfectly overlapping interests.⁹ Yet, alliances require some measure of commitment to use force. This means that alliance formation and management are shaped by a bargaining process

animated by the willingness and ability of the actors involved to offer or extract credible commitments. Whether in the context of threats or promises, to be perceived as credible, commitments require self-enforcing obligations that visibly undercut an actor's flexibility in a way that convinces another actor (friend or foe) that the one making the commitment is, without question, tied to a certain course of action. To appear credible, commitments require measures that decision-makers will often hesitate or refuse to take. These can include explicit public statements and inherently costly military moves, such as alerting forces, canceling leave for military personnel, and moving units closer to a potential theater of operations.¹⁰ Classic, symmetric alliances between states of roughly equal capability are used as tools for aggregating capabilities against a threat, meaning that both partners receive security from their alliance.¹¹ To appear meaningful, allies engaged in symmetric alliances are required to undercut their own freedom of action through self-enforcing obligations and realignment according to their partner's interests.¹² This renders alliances a source of concern for their members, who often fear that their allies' preferences and interests might ultimately come at the expense of their own. A state entering into an alliance could become the victim of entrapment by an ally deliberately seeking to embroil it in war. Conversely, having trusted the ally and counted on its support, a state could be abandoned in a time of need.¹³ Alliance

2 Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 12.

3 Brett Ashley Leeds, "Do Alliances Deter Aggression? The Influence of Military Alliances on the Initiation of Militarized Interstate Disputes," *American Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 3 (July 2003), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-5907.00031>; Brett B. Benson, "Unpacking Alliances: Deterrent and Compellent Alliances and Their Relationship with Conflict, 1816–2000," *Journal of Politics* 73, no. 4 (October 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381611000867>.

4 Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (July 1984): 461, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010183>.

5 Paul W. Schroeder, "Alliances, 1815–1945: Weapons of the Power and Tools of Management," in *Historical Dimensions of National Security Problems*, ed. Klaus Knorr (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1976); Jeremy Pressman, *Warring Friends: Alliance Restraint in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); Victor D. Cha, "Powerplay: Origins of the U.S. Alliance System in Asia," *International Security* 34, no. 3 (Winter 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2010.34.3.158>.

6 James D. Morrow, "Alliances: Why Write Them Down?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 3 (2000): 63, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.3.1.63>; Schroeder, "Alliances, 1815–1945," 230.

7 Patricia A. Weitsman, *Waging War: Alliances, Coalitions, and Institutions of Interstate Violence* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), chap. 2.

8 "Lord Palmerston 1784–1865 British statesman; Prime Minister, 1855–8, 1859–65," in *Oxford Essential Quotations*, ed. Susan Ratcliffe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

9 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 166–67. Stephen Walt notes that allies share only "some level of commitment." Walt, *Origins of Alliances*, 1.

10 According to Thomas Schelling, "to take advantage of the usually superior credibility of the truth over a false assertion," actors need to "make it true," make an irrevocable, binding and "unambiguously visible" commitment. Put differently, for threats to be credible the threatener must remove all easy and cheap options from the table and visibly destroy his own escape routes. Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1981) chap. 2; and Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 99–105. Branislav L. Slantchev, *Military Threats: The Costs of Coercion and the Price of Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), chap. 3.

11 James D. Morrow, "Alliances and Asymmetry: An Alternative to the Capability Aggregation Model of Alliances," *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 4 (November 1991): 904, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2111499>.

12 Morrow, "Alliances and Asymmetry," 930.

13 Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization* 44, no. 2 (Spring 1990), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300035232>.

commitments could also inadvertently embolden an otherwise risk-averse ally and result in what Glenn Snyder describes as an alliance security dilemma: This occurs when states provide an ally with too sweeping a reassurance in order to deter a third actor, only to become entrapped in war.¹⁴ This inherent tension between allies' interests and preferences constitutes the essence of alliance politics.

These perceived problems are further exacerbated in asymmetric settings. If symmetric alliances provide their members with security, asymmetric alliances provide the weaker ally with security and the stronger partner with autonomy.¹⁵ While all allies fear becoming embroiled in someone else's wars, asymmetric alliances worsen actors' fear of entrapment. Entrapment — or “chain-ganging” — looms large in such relationships, with both sides afraid of falling prey, albeit for different reasons. Having traded its autonomy, the weak ally fears that its partner's military superiority provides overwhelming leverage and jeopardizes its independence.¹⁶ By contrast, the senior ally worries that its counterpart might exploit its superior capabilities, initiate a crisis, and manipulate it into coming to its aid. This concern, however, appears greatly exaggerated given the variety of ways strong allies are capable of mobilizing their resources and exploiting their leverage to shield themselves from entrapment or rein in a weaker ally. Jeremy Pressman has found that when strong allies mobilize their superior resources to restrain a weaker ally, they prevail.¹⁷ Also, powerful allies use their stronger bargaining power to introduce escape clauses into their alliance agreements and arm-twist their partners into compliance.¹⁸ In this vein, Michael Beckley has found that, while the fear of entrapment may be prevalent in international

relations literature, in reality, it is rare. Drawing on an extensive empirical analysis of the vast U.S. alliance network, Beckley has shown that the United States successfully dictates the terms of its security commitments.¹⁹ This finding is congruent with Tongfi Kim's argument that victims of entrapment are more likely to be weaker allies with little power.²⁰ The historical record indicates that Israel, which greatly depends on the United States, fits into this pattern.²¹ After all, as Henry Kissinger remarked, “For Israel to go to war at the known displeasure of the U.S. would be a monumental decision.”²²

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This, of course, does not mean that weak allies lack ways of influencing their senior allies. As Robert Keohane has pointed out, superior capabilities do not guarantee full or automatic small-ally compliance with the interests and desires of senior allies. Weak allies are sometimes capable of exploiting mutual dependence to generate bargaining power. If the weaker ally is sufficiently important to its partner, it could deny benefits to its senior ally and even “threaten collapse if not aided sufficiently.”²³ Writing about the U.S. alliance system during the Cold War, Keohane argued that

14 Snyder, “Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics.”

15 Morrow, “Alliances and Asymmetry.”

16 Galia Press-Barnathan, “Managing the Hegemon: NATO Under Unipolarity,” *Security Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 283–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410600829554>. Tongfi Kim argues that victims of entrapment are more likely to be weaker allies with little power, as “stronger states have stronger bargaining power,” in “Why Alliances Entangle but Seldom Entrap States,” *Security Studies* 20, no. 3 (2011): 357, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2011.599201>.

17 Pressman, *Warring Friends*, 121.

18 Morrow, “Alliances: Why Write Them Down,” 79; Gene Gerzhoy, “Alliance Coercion and Nuclear Restraint: How the United States Thwarted West Germany's Nuclear Ambitions,” *International Security* 39, no. 4 (Spring 2015), https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00198.

19 Michael Beckley, “The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts,” *International Security* 39, no. 4 (Spring 2015): 11, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00197.

20 Kim, “Why Alliances Entangle,” 357.

21 Pressman, *Warring Friends*, 121–22. Perhaps most strikingly, on the eve of the Six-Day War in 1967, President Lyndon Johnson minced no words when warning Israel not to initiate war with Egypt, stressing that “Israel will not be alone unless it decides to go it alone.” See “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Vol. XIX, Arab-Israeli Crisis and War, 1967,” U.S. State Department, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v19>.

22 “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XXVI, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1974–1976,” U.S. State Department, Office of the Historian, 588, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v26>.

23 Robert O. Keohane, “The Big Influence of Small Allies,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 2 (Spring 1971): 162, 164–72, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1147864>.

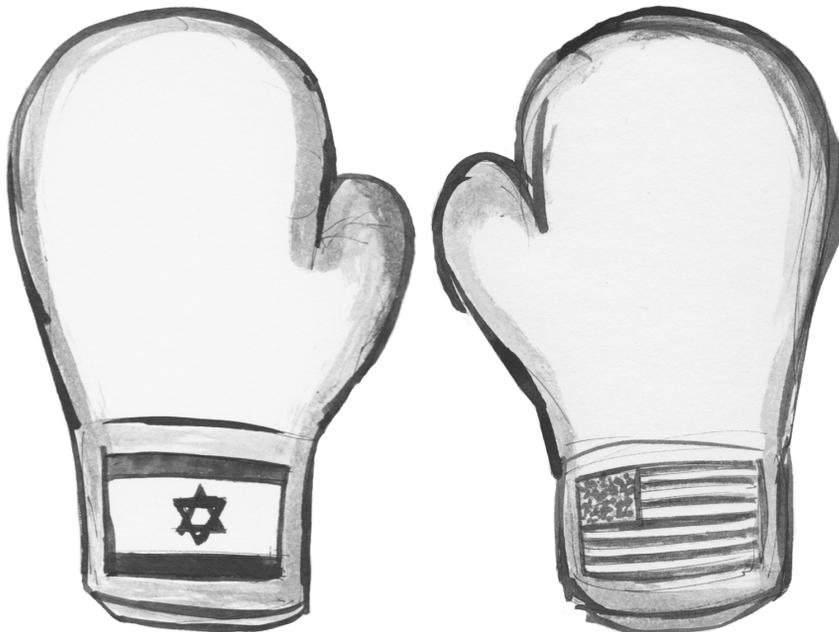
U.S. perception of its weak allies' importance gave them "a degree of influential access to American decision-making and decision-makers far out of proportion to their size."²⁴ Keohane identified three avenues through which America's weaker allies shaped U.S. policy: formal state-to-state negotiations, bargaining with separable elements of the U.S. government, and using private interest groups to influence domestic public opinion.²⁵ Notably, Keohane focused on relatively limited small-power influence, and some scholars argue that entrapment has caused major wars, namely World War I, in which the European powers chain-ganged one another into disaster.²⁶

Israel's relationship with the United States has attracted special scholarly attention given the power disparity between the two countries and Israel's perceived capacity to punch above its weight. Expanding on Keohane's work, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt attribute the effectiveness of the pro-Israel lobby in the United States to its influence over Congress.²⁷

That the empirical record does not reveal unambiguous cases of entrapment is of little relevance or consolation for states fearing future entrapment. Leaders are afraid of becoming the

exception to this rule. Moreover, the prevailing fear of being chain-ganged to a reckless ally can be deliberately manipulated by a weaker ally in a purposeful effort to bolster its bargaining position and improve the terms of the alliance. This effort could even have coercive attributes. Ultimately, this means tying the other ally into a stronger commitment and limiting its freedom of action. The literature on alliance politics so far has overlooked the manner in which a country might seek to deliberately exploit an ally's fear of entrapment as an instrument of bargaining. This article tells the story of just that.

The episode analyzed in this article offers an exceptional opportunity to advance an understanding of coercive bargaining in an asymmetric alliance. After all, Israel and the United States are considered extremely close, and both were opposed to Iran ever obtaining a nuclear weapon. When it came to confronting the Iranian challenge, however, not only did their interests, constraints, and preferences not overlap, but the issue was also one in which the stakes were extremely high for both sides — potentially even existential for Israel. This led both parties — perhaps Israel more than the United States — to



24 Keohane, "Big Influence," 162.

25 Keohane, "Big Influence," 165–66. On this, see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), chaps. 5 and 6.

26 Christensen and Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks," 137–68; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 166–67.

27 Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby*, 152.

bring their influence to bear on the other.

In this article, I offer a rigorous examination of the strategic interaction and the intense bargaining that took place between Israel and the United States in 2011 and 2012. Ultimately, neither country attacked Iran, but this result was not preordained. Nor was Tehran's and Washington's preparedness to engage in direct diplomacy inevitable, though this led to the Iran nuclear deal in 2015. Nonetheless, this outcome cannot be fully understood without first understanding the strategic interaction that preceded diplomacy. Given the recent U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, this topic is of acute relevance.

Israeli and U.S. Perspectives on the Iranian Nuclear Question

Different states, including close allies, do not view threats in the same way. Interests and preferences in international politics diverge because all countries operate under disparate strategic circumstances, confront different threats, possess specific military capabilities to cope with those threats, and face unique constraints. Allies are no different. Rarely will allies feel equally threatened by the same challenge. These structural tensions were on full display over the Iran nuclear issue. Although Israel and the United States generally shared the objective of preventing Iran from obtaining military nuclear capability, the prospect of a nuclear Iran posed a graver threat to Israel than to the militarily preponderant and geographically distant United States. The two allies thus disagreed on the urgency of the situation and on the proper means and level of economic pressure required to prevent Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold. Importantly, they differed on what constituted the nuclear threshold. For Israel, the threshold represented

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the stage at which Iran — having hardened and dispersed its nuclear program to render it resilient to an Israeli strike — could, if it so chose, “break out” and produce a bomb in a short period of time. For Obama, however, the threshold represented not Iran's potential to break out, but the act itself.²⁸

The United States had been imposing sanctions on Iran unilaterally since 1979 and through the U.N. Security Council since 2006. However significant and painful for Iran, these sanctions were nonetheless relatively limited in scope, focusing primarily on the country's nuclear and ballistic missile programs.²⁹ Israel, however, called for the urgent imposition of far-reaching sanctions targeting Iran's energy sector. In early 2010, for example, Netanyahu demanded that “crippling sanctions” be imposed “right now.”³⁰

Although Obama had entered the White House determined to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, including, he said, with military force if necessary, he was determined to achieve this outcome through diplomacy and direct engagement.³¹ As part of this approach, the U.S. financial pressure campaign on Iran, begun in 2006, was put on hold in 2009 and not fully resumed until mid-2010.³² Weeks into his presidency, having already secretly reached out to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, during the election campaign, Obama sent two additional letters to Khamenei. While Iran's leader responded to Obama's first letter, he never replied to the second letter, in which the president had proposed direct

28 Asked if he would have taken military action against Iran, Obama said, “I actually would have. If I saw them break out. Now, the argument that can't be resolved, because it's entirely situational, was what constitutes them getting [the bomb]. This was the argument I was having with Bibi Netanyahu.” See Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

29 Gary Samore, *Sanctions Against Iran: A Guide to Targets, Terms, and Timetables* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, June 2015), 3–11.

30 Douglas Hamilton, “Israel Urges ‘Crippling’ Sanctions Now Against Iran,” *Reuters*, Feb. 9, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-iran-netanyahu/israel-urges-crippling-sanctions-now-against-iran-idUSTRE6181Z020100209>.

31 Obama had indicated this explicitly throughout his campaign. See “Interview With Barack Obama,” *New York Times*, Nov. 1, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/01/us/politics/02obama-transcript.html>.

32 Juan C. Zarate, *Treasury's War: The Unleashing of a New Era of Financial Warfare* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013), 324. It was not until July 2012, however, that a direct diplomatic back-channel would be established between Iran and the United States, in Oman. See Mark Landler, *Alter Egos: Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and the Twilight Struggle Over American Power* (New York: Random House, 2016), 252; and Jay Solomon, *The Iran Wars: Spy Games, Bank Battles, and the Secret Deals that Reshaped the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2016), 242–44.



talks between the United States and Iran over its nuclear program.³³ Meanwhile, quiet efforts were being exerted by Oman to establish a secret line of communication between the United States and Iran. While Oman's efforts with the State Department reached an impasse, Sen. John Kerry used Oman to convey messages to Tehran in 2011 and the first half of 2012.³⁴ Israel, which had picked up on these secret contacts and found them troubling, leaked them to the Israeli press in April 2012.³⁵ As Barak would later tell this author, "We knew quite a bit about the informal, indirect contacts between the Americans and the Iranians. ... I was very concerned that the American tone was not sufficiently clear so as to bring the Iranians to a decision."³⁶ It was not until March 2013, however, that a direct and permanent diplomatic back-channel in Oman was established between Iran and the United States.³⁷

All this time, Iran continued to develop its uranium enrichment capabilities. In late September 2009, Obama publicly disclosed that Tehran had been constructing a secret nuclear fuel enrichment plant near Fordow, a village northeast of the city of Qom.³⁸ This "constituted the final straw for the administration, which now had no choice but to go into pressure mode again," according to former senior Treasury official Juan Zarate. In the fall of 2009, Obama sought to restart the financial pressure campaign on Iran but decided to first seek a new U.N. resolution mandating tougher sanctions — a process that lasted several months.³⁹ In June 2010, the U.N. Security Council passed Resolution 1929, which constituted the strictest round of sanctions up to that point. The resolution noted

"the potential connection between Iran's revenues derived from its energy sector and the funding of Iran's proliferation-sensitive nuclear activities."⁴⁰ This language would eventually pave the way for a full E.U. embargo on Iranian oil.⁴¹ It was against the backdrop of increasingly aggressive international pressure on Iran that the U.S. Senate passed the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act. Placing significant new restrictions on Iran's energy sector, the legislation stipulated that banks conducting transactions with the Central Bank of Iran could not do business in the United States.⁴² Still, at this stage in 2010, the U.S. Treasury Department was pursuing a "gradualist constriction campaign" designed to avoid "blunt steps that would upset the balance of the international financial system" or cause U.S. allies in Europe and Asia, who depended heavily on Iranian oil imports, to resist cooperation with tougher sanctions.⁴³ As I discuss later in this article, additional pressure would be needed to influence the White House to unleash measures long referred to by the Treasury as the "final bullet" and "the nuclear weapon" in its arsenal: an oil embargo and sanctions on the Central Bank of Iran.⁴⁴ At least part of this pressure and its outcome can be attributed to Israeli influence.

Divergence of Interests Within the U.S.-Israel Alliance

In November 2011, Israeli Defense Minister Barak began stressing that, in less than a year, "probably three-quarters," Iran's nuclear program

33 Christiane Amanpour, "Obama Sent Letter to Iran Leader Before Election, Sources Say," *CNN*, June 24, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/06/24/iran.obama.letter/index.html>.

34 Landler, *Alter Egos*, chap. 10.

35 In April 2012, the Israeli daily *Yediot Aharonot* cited a senior Israeli source as saying that Israel had found out that semi-official U.S. figures had been in contact with the Iranian government in a bid to reach a compromise on the nuclear issue. The official said, "The Iranians are convinced that given the secret channel and the United States' request that Israel does not attack Iran, Israel will not dare do it, at least for the time being. The Iranians believe they've achieved at least a postponement of the attack, if not more than that." Ronen Bergman, "An All-Clear Siren for Tehran," *Yediot Aharonot*, April 8, 2012.

36 Author telephone interview with Ehud Barak, April 26, 2016.

37 Landler, *Alter Egos*, 253–54.

38 Karen DeYoung and Michael D. Shea, "U.S., Allies Say Iran Has Secret Nuclear Facility," *Washington Post*, Sept. 26, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/25/AR2009092500289.html>.

39 Zarate, *Treasury's War*, 328.

40 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1929, adopted June 6, 2010, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1929%282010%29.

41 Samore, *Sanctions Against Iran*, 6.

42 Zarate, *Treasury's War*, 336–37.

43 Zarate, *Treasury's War*.

44 Washington had regarded sanctions on Iran's Central Bank and oil sector as the "final bullet" in the U.S. arsenal. See Zarate, *Treasury's War*, 307–9, 314–16. In the Treasury Department, such sanctions were referred to as the "nuclear option" and were thus held in reserve. See Solomon, *The Iran Wars*, 194–95.

would enter a “zone of immunity,” effectively rendering it resilient to an Israeli attack.⁴⁵ Unlike Israel, the United States possessed advanced munitions capable of penetrating Iran’s fortified installations, as well as the bomber jets to deliver them. Therefore, the United States would remain capable of executing a decisive military attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities long after they had become invulnerable to an Israeli assault. Or, as Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta told Barak, whereas Israel could give the Iranians only “a black eye,” the United States had the military capability to “deliver the knockout punch” and “take out Fordow.”⁴⁶ The two allies were thus operating on different timetables. In March 2012, addressing the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), Netanyahu warned,

Israel has waited patiently for the international community to resolve this issue. We’ve waited for diplomacy to work. We’ve waited for sanctions to work. None of us can afford to wait much longer. As prime minister of Israel, I will never let my people live under the shadow of annihilation.⁴⁷

Days later, he explained, “The biggest difference is between the American clock ... and the Israeli clock,” adding that, “America is big and far away; we aren’t as big and are more nearby. We have different capabilities — nothing to belittle — but nonetheless different.”⁴⁸

Washington’s opposition to a military strike was driven by indisputable strategic constraints. The United States was engaged militarily in Iraq and Afghanistan and was still recovering from the 2008 financial crisis. With two military commitments already underway, Obama — now entering an election year — was averse to risking a third war involving an oil-rich country

in a particularly sensitive part of the world, with potentially ominous implications for global energy markets. As the United States was well aware, these constraints were not lost on Israel. In August 2012, the Israeli daily, *Yediot Aharonot*, ran a front-page report by its two most senior columnists in which they argued that, if it were up to Netanyahu and Barak, a military strike would take place “before the November elections in the United States.”⁴⁹ Obama was therefore particularly vulnerable to Israeli manipulation and exploitation. According to former Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, “The perception in Washington was that the Israeli leadership — especially Netanyahu — saw their leverage as greatest in the run-up to the 2012 elections.”⁵⁰ The United States was clearly concerned that its junior ally might simply present it with a *fait accompli*, a worry exacerbated by Israel’s determination to keep the United States at arm’s length. In March 2012, after a U.S. official had already warned, “We don’t have perfect visibility” into Israel’s arsenal or calculations,⁵¹ the *Washington Post* cited U.S. officials as noting that “no formal agreement has been reached with Israel over how a strike would be conducted — or

While the United States feared entrapment, Israel feared abandonment.

when Obama would be informed about it.” Other officials added that the “assumption inside the White House and the Pentagon is that Israel would not give the United States warning, allowing the administration to deny prior knowledge but also

45 “Fareed Zakaria GPS,” *CNN*, Nov. 20, 2011. Declaring that 2012 was “a very important year,” Barak argued, “After 2012 it will become difficult to achieve a meaningful delay in the Iranian nuclear project by any means.” Channel 2 TV, Feb. 23, 2012.

46 Leon Panetta, *Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 404.

47 “Netanyahu’s Speech at AIPAC (Full Text),” *Times of Israel*, March 6, 2012, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahus-speech-at-aipac-full-text/>.

48 Channel 2, March 12, 2012. Two months later, Barak noted with respect to the Israel-U.S. debate about Iran’s nuclear program, “There are obviously differences between us — in the approach, in the speed at which our clocks are ticking. It is no secret that our clock is ticking faster.” See Institute for National Security Studies Annual Conference, Tel Aviv, May 30, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oZ1X6WspMM>.

49 Dan Williams, “Israel Wants to Attack Iran Before U.S. Vote: Israeli Report,” *Reuters*, Aug. 10, 2012, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/israel-wants-to-attack-iran-before-us-vote-israeli-report/article4473446/>.

50 Author telephone interview with William Burns, June 15, 2017.

51 Elisabeth Bumiller, “Iran Raid Seen as a Huge Task for Israeli Jets,” *New York Times*, Feb. 19, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/20/world/middleeast/iran-raid-seen-as-complex-task-for-israeli-military.html>.



limiting its ability to defend U.S. military assets in the region.”⁵²

From a U.S. perspective, if Israel was indeed planning unilateral action in a deliberate attempt to entrap the United States in the ensuing conflict, the question of whether Israel possessed the military capability to achieve a substantial delay in Iran’s nuclear program was of less importance.

Former CIA director Michael Hayden has noted that if Israel attacked the “disbursed and hardened” Iranian nuclear program, “there would be many of us in government thinking that the purpose of the raid wasn’t to destroy the Iranian nuclear system, but the purpose of the raid was to put us at war with Iran.”⁵³ Indications of U.S. fear of entrapment appeared in real time. In February 2012, a front-page *New York Times* article cited defense analysts in Washington as questioning “whether Israel even has the military capacity” to attack Iran. The report said, “One fear is that the United States would be sucked into finishing the job — a task that even with America’s far larger arsenal of aircraft and munitions could still take many weeks.”⁵⁴ The following month, Panetta told U.S. troops that “if Israel decides to go after Iran and we have to defend ourselves, we could be engaged sooner than any of us want.”⁵⁵

Was Israel indeed contemplating such an attack only to embroil its senior ally in a war? It seems that way. According to Barak, in the summer of 2012 he was approached by a Netanyahu confidant who sounded him out on launching a strike on Iran two weeks before the U.S. elections. Barak recalls the person explaining that, politically, Obama would feel “compelled to support Israel’s action, or at the very least to refrain from criticizing it. In other words, we would be setting a political trap for the president of the United States.”⁵⁶

From a U.S. standpoint, Israel was militarily capable of dodging its surveillance capabilities and presenting it with an established fact. Panetta, who had served as CIA director before being appointed secretary of defense, noted in this regard that,

although the United States “had sources that could provide some pretty good intelligence on whether or not that kind of attack was being prepared for,” a country “as sophisticated as Israel” could have found ways to “effectively cover up that kind of possibility, because they know that we have those kinds of sources.”⁵⁷ Daniel B. Shapiro, who was U.S. ambassador to Israel at the time, added, “We were pretty certain that if they didn’t give us warning we would not have advance warning. They were fully capable of surprising the U.S. and give us not more than an hour or two’s notice.”⁵⁸

While the United States feared entrapment, Israel feared abandonment. Jerusalem was especially concerned that, as Tehran’s nuclear program became increasingly dispersed and resilient, Israel would become dependent upon others — namely the United States — for the elimination of a potentially existential threat. Yet, this was precisely what Israel’s senior ally was asking. As Panetta would later write, “Israel had to trust that we would act if the time came, that we would not flinch at the moment of truth even if the graver threat was not to the United States but to Israel. That’s a lot of trust to place in an ally, even a close and historic ally.”⁵⁹

From Israel’s perspective, even if Obama was sincere about not removing any option from the table, he was still, in a sense, bluffing. As Barak reported telling Obama in 2012,

There are no future contracts in statesmanship. There’s no way that you, or any leader, can commit yourself to what will happen in a year or two. When the moment of decision arrives, nothing will be able to free you from your responsibility to look at the situation as it is *then*, with *American* interests in mind.

Barak further told Obama that when “it comes to issues critical for the security and future of Israel, and in a way for the security of the Jewish people

52 Scott Wilson, “In Meeting, Obama to Warn Netanyahu Against Military Strikes on Iran,” *Washington Post*, March 2, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-meeting-obama-to-warn-netanyahu-against-military-strikes-on-iran/2012/03/02/gIQA5Wf0mR_story.html.

53 “Zero Days,” directed by Alex Gibney (New York: Magnolia Pictures, 2016).

54 Bumiller, “Iran Raid.”

55 “Secretary Panetta All Hands Call USS Peleliu,” Department of Defense, March 30, 2012, <http://archive.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5004>.

56 Ehud Barak, *My Country, My Life: Fighting for Israel, Searching for Peace* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018), 435–36. In a separate interview, Barak noted, “In 2012 Netanyahu was playing around with all sorts of ideas. I was opposed to them. I reemphasized my position: we will not endanger the life of even one American soldier.” See Nahum Barnea, “Why We Did Not Attack Iran,” *Yediot Aharonot*, April 27, 2017.

57 Author telephone interview with Leon Panetta, Aug. 12, 2016.

58 Author interview with Daniel B. Shapiro, Tel Aviv, Jan. 10, 2018.

59 Leon Panetta, *Worthy Fights*, 404.

... we can't afford to delegate responsibility even to our best friend and ally." Alluding to the United States, Barak went on to stress: "Our problem, Mr. President, is that we can't be sure our friend will show up."⁶⁰ From Israel's vantage point, if Israel were ever to lose its credible military option against Iran, it "would no longer be an actor" in the Iranian context.⁶¹ In other words, having lost its military options, leverage, and bargaining power, Israel's interests would become less of a factor, including in U.S. policy considerations. As Barak later put it, while stopping Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon was a "vital interest" for Israel, it was only "an important interest" for the United States.⁶² Given the stakes for each country, this made for an impossible situation for both sides.

With limited direct leverage over Iran, Israel sought to harness the militarily superior United States in the service of forcing Tehran to choose between pursuing its nuclear program and risking devastating economic sanctions and possibly even a military attack. Israel thus sought to limit Obama's flexibility and wrest an explicit, credible U.S. commitment to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon — in other words, a commitment Iran would take seriously. Of course, given the prerequisites for credibility in international relations, Obama was essentially being asked by the United States' junior ally to restrict his maneuverability and control. This perception was precisely why the Obama administration resisted Israel's efforts.

Israel's leaders proceeded to present the United States with two explicit demands. First, Israel wanted Washington to lead an international effort to impose crippling economic sanctions on Iran. As noted, Israel demanded broad sanctions that would go beyond those that had already been implemented. Jerusalem wanted sanctions that would cripple Iran's energy and financial sectors. To prod its ally into action, Israel's defense minister declared in November 2011, "We are probably facing

the last opportunity for internationally coordinated deadly sanctions that will force Iran to stop." Specifically, Barak called for "sanctions on the financial transactions, on the ability to carry out international financial deals, including the Central Bank, sanctions that stop — physically if needed — the import and export of oil and refinements."⁶³ That Israel was expecting the United States to lead this effort was reflected in the words of a "senior Israeli official" cited the next day as having said, "The name of the game now is the ability of U.S. President Obama to gather the leaderships of important countries such as Germany, France, Canada, and Australia in a coalition, and rein in Russia and China to impose paralyzing sanctions on Iran."⁶⁴ That same demand was repeated in a coercive, yet informal, fashion, which implicitly threatened to entrap the United States in a conflict with Iran: Senior Israeli military affairs analyst Ron Ben-Yishai said Israel was communicating an "important signal" to Washington, Moscow, and Beijing: "Either you impose truly painful sanctions to block Iran's race to a bomb, with minimum cost to all of us, or we will be forced to act and then we will all pay the price."⁶⁵ Coming from a well-connected analyst, these words almost certainly reflected a briefing by a senior official.

Second, Israel expected the United States to establish a credible military threat against Iran or, in the words of Israeli Strategic Affairs Minister Moshe Yaalon, to take measures that would make "the Iranian regime understand that if it does not stop its military nuclear program someone will attack it."⁶⁶ Referring to the U.S. position toward Iran, an Israeli official asked, "There are a lot of general statements they [the United States] think we want to hear... How are the Iranians to understand that if they don't stop then they will eventually get hit?"⁶⁷ On another occasion, a senior Israeli official told the *New York Times*, in reference to the Obama administration, that "For the Iranians to understand that they really mean

60 Ehud Barak, *My Country, My Life*, 433–34.

61 Ari Shavit, "The Decision-Maker Is Warning: U.S. Cannot Be Trusted to Attack Iran on Time," *Haaretz*, Aug. 10, 2012, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/magazine/1.1797127>.

62 Author interview with Ehud Barak, New York, May 31, 2016.

63 "Hakol Diburim," *Voice of Israel*, Nov. 1, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkCwM1fG0so&feature=youtu.be>.

64 Shlomo Tsezna, "Israel: The World Must Stop Tehran," *Yisrael Hayom*, Nov. 10, 2011, <http://digital-edition.israelhayom.co.il/Olive/APA/Israel/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=ITD%2F2011%2F11%2F10&id=Ar00700&sk=000DD7E1&viewMode=text>.

65 Ron Ben-Yishai, "The IDF Is Already Prepared for Attack on Iran," *Ynet*, Nov. 3, 2011, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4143344,00.html>.

66 "Ha-Nivharim with David Ben-Bassat," *Hot TV*, Aug. 31, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPzaY-lduE4&feature=youtu.be>.

67 Barak Ravid, "The Prime Minister to Ask Obama to Threaten to Attack Iran," *Haaretz*, Feb. 29, 2012, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.1652900>.



it, they [the Iranians] have to hear it publicly and clearly.”⁶⁸ From Israel’s standpoint, a credible U.S. military threat that Iran would take seriously required a credible Israeli military threat that the United States would take seriously.

A History of the Iran Debate Before October 2011

Israeli concern regarding Iran’s nuclear program and the prospect of nuclear-weapons capability dates to the 1990s. Although in subsequent years, especially during President George W. Bush’s second term, U.S. concern would emerge regarding the possibility of an Israeli military strike on Iran, no stage was as intense and urgent as that of late 2011. Even when Israel was working on a military option, it did not engage in a concerted, strategic pressure campaign against the United States until 2011. Nor had the United States engaged in such forceful dissuasion efforts toward Israel as it would in the period discussed in this article.

Although Iran’s perceived quest for military nuclear capability had long been a topic of debate and concern, Israel deliberately presented it as a global challenge rather than a challenge for Israel alone. Israeli policy maintained that the effort to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon should be led by the entire international community.⁶⁹

At the same time, however, Israel was also investing in a military option against Iran. In mid-2008, media reports began to emerge about atypically large-scale Israeli aerial exercises. These were widely interpreted as rehearsals for a preventive strike on Iran. But if these drills were designed to create the impression that Israel might be preparing to target Iran, such intentions were undercut by statements that Israel was still giving precedence to diplomacy and economic sanctions

and that it would not surprise its U.S. ally with a unilateral military attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities.

In May 2008, Bush reportedly rejected Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s request for a green light to attack Iran’s nuclear sites.⁷⁰ That same month, Israel presented the United States with several arms requests, which Defense Secretary Robert Gates saw as presaging a military attack on Iran. “I recommended saying no to all the Israelis’ requests,” Gates later recalled. “Giving them any of the items on their new list would signal U.S. support for them to attack Iran unilaterally.”⁷¹ Gates also worried that U.S. acquiescence to Israel’s arms requests would have provided it with a dangerous degree of autonomy to act independently against Iran and thus grant it leverage over the United States. “I said we would be handing over the initiative regarding U.S. vital national interests to a foreign power,” he noted.⁷² Gates believes it was “probably not coincidental” that on June 2, 2008, the Israeli Air Force conducted a major exercise that included more than a hundred fighter jets, helicopters, and refueling tankers.⁷³ On June 20, the *New York Times* reported the unusual Israeli aerial mission and cited U.S. officials as describing the exercise, in which the planes had flown from Israel to Greece and back, as a multi-pronged Israeli signal. “They wanted us to know, they wanted the Europeans to know, and they wanted the Iranians to know,” a Pentagon official said. “There’s a lot of signaling going on at different levels.”⁷⁴ Whether the exercise was intended as an Israeli signal to its principal ally, it was perceived as such in Washington. As Gates later wrote,

The Israelis held a military exercise they knew would be monitored by many nations. ... The distance the fighters flew was 862 nautical miles. The distance from the Israeli airfield to the Iranian uranium enrichment facility at Natanz was 860 nautical miles.

68 Jodi Rudoren, “U.S. Envoy to Israel Says Nation Is Ready on Iran,” *New York Times*, May 17, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/18/world/middleeast/united-states-ambassador-dan-shapiro-to-israel-speaks-of-military-option-for-iran.html>.

69 As prime minister, Ehud Olmert stressed in a 2006 interview that Israel should not stand “on the forefront of this war.” Iran, he added, was a “major threat” to “Europe and America just as much as it is for the state of Israel.” See Romesh Ratnesar, “Israel Should Not Be on the Forefront of a War Against Iran,” *Time*, April 9, 2006.

70 Jonathan Steele, “Israel Asked US for Green Light to Bomb Nuclear Sites in Iran,” *Guardian*, Sept. 25, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/sep/25/iran.israelandthepalestinians1>.

71 Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 190–91.

72 Gates, *Duty*.

73 Gates, *Duty*, 192; “Israeli Air Exercise Probably Message to Iran, U.S. Official Says,” *CNN*, June 20, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/06/20/israel.exercise/index.html>.

74 Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Says Israeli Exercise Seemed Directed at Iran,” *New York Times*, June 20, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/20/washington/20iran.html>.

Israel wanted to signal that it was prepared for a strike and could carry it out.⁷⁵

At the same time, however, U.S. officials ruled out an imminent Israeli attack on Iran.⁷⁶ Moreover, Israel signaled it would adhere to diplomacy,⁷⁷ confirming that military action was not in the offing.⁷⁸

Still, Israel's efforts to establish a military option persisted. In 2009, a French weekly revealed that the Israeli Air Force carried out another large-scale military rehearsal — this time, over the Strait of Gibraltar, some 1,800 miles from Israel.⁷⁹ However,

Even when Israel was working on a military option, it did not engage in a concerted, strategic pressure campaign against the United States until 2011.

an Israeli intelligence official commenting on the matter just two weeks before the French report said that it was unlikely Israel would attack Iran without receiving at least tacit U.S. approval.⁸⁰ Moreover, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman remarked that Israel would not attack Iran militarily even if sanctions failed. Saying that the most effective means to stop Iran were “severe sanctions, very

severe sanctions,” he added, “We are not talking about a military attack.” Toeing Israel's official line, Lieberman stressed, “Israel cannot resolve militarily the entire world's problems. I propose that the United States, as the largest power in the world, assume responsibility for resolving the Iranian question.”⁸¹

That Israel was honing its military option undoubtedly generated concern in Washington. But still, this was a general worry about the possibility that Israel would ultimately feel compelled to act unilaterally. At times, this broad concern led the United States into taking greater risks than it may have otherwise in order to reassure and restrain the Israelis. One such example is Operation Olympic Games (“Stuxnet”), in which the United States and Israel joined forces in a cyberattack on Iran's nuclear enrichment facility at Natanz. Although not the only reason, anxiety about the prospect of an Israeli strike on Iran reportedly played an important role in persuading the United States to engage in the attack.⁸²

On March 31, 2009, Netanyahu returned to the office of prime minister, a post he had left a decade earlier. Unlike his predecessors, who portrayed Iran as a global challenge, Netanyahu described Iran as analogous to Nazi Germany.⁸³ As prime minister, Netanyahu would gradually “take ownership” of the Iranian issue. In 2009 and 2010, however, Israel remained committed to working together with the

75 Gates, *Duty*, 192.

76 Gordon and Schmitt, “U.S. Says Israeli Exercise Seemed Directed at Iran.”

77 Commenting on the report, an Israeli official urged Tehran to “read the writing on the wall ... this was a dress rehearsal. ... If diplomacy does not yield results, Israel will take military steps to halt Tehran's production of bomb-grade uranium.” Sheera Frenkel, “Israeli Jets in Long-Range ‘Test Mission’ for Airstrike on Iran,” *Times* (London), June 21, 2008.

78 Israeli Infrastructure Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, a former defense minister, stated, “We are not planning any attack against Iran.” See “Top US Military Officer Heads to Israel With Iran on the Agenda,” *Agence France-Presse*, June 25, 2008. When Transportation Minister Shaul Mofaz, previously the minister of defense and Israel Defense Forces chief of staff, warned that if Iran continued its plans to produce a nuclear weapon, “we will attack it,” he was promptly reprimanded by Barak, who characterized his statements as “harmful.” Mofaz, Barak said, “knows there is a decision that when it comes to the Iranian issue Israel does not stand at the forefront.” Barak Ravid, Yossi Verter, and Mazal Muallem, “Defense Minister Barak: Mofaz Statements on Attack on Iran Irresponsible,” *Haaretz*, June 8, 2008.

79 “L'Express: IAF Held Iran Strike Drill Above Strait of Gibraltar,” *Jerusalem Post*, May 3, 2009; “IDF Staged Drills Over Gibraltar, in Preparation for Iran Strike,” *Haaretz*, May 3, 2009.

80 Sheera Frenkel, “Israel Stands Ready to Bomb Iran's Nuclear Sites,” *Times* (London), April 18, 2009.

81 Ofer Aderet, “Lieberman: Israel Will Not Attack Iran — Even if Sanctions Fail,” *Haaretz*, April 26, 2009.

82 David E. Sanger, “Obama Order Sped Up Wave of Cyberattacks Against Iran,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/01/world/middleeast/obama-ordered-wave-of-cyberattacks-against-iran.html>; and David E. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power* (New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2012), 188–225.

83 Peter Hirschberg, “Netanyahu: It's 1938 and Iran Is Germany; Ahmadinejad Is Preparing Another Holocaust,” *Haaretz*, Nov. 14, 2006; and Shmuel Rosner, “Playing the Holocaust Card,” *New York Times*, April 25, 2012, <https://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/25/netanyahu-cant-go-wrong-claiming-that-iran-is-planning-another-holocaust/>.



United States to deal with the perceived Iranian threat.⁸⁴ In July 2010, Obama was asked whether Israel might unilaterally attack Iran. He responded that Netanyahu was “committed” to a coordinated approach.⁸⁵ A year later, when Shapiro began his tenure as U.S. ambassador to Israel, he too found that the two countries’ national security establishments shared a “coordinated approach” toward Iran.⁸⁶ This would change within three months.

Israel’s Pressure Campaign: Generating a War Scare

The possibility of an Israeli military assault on Iran’s nuclear facilities had long been a topic of speculation and concern.⁸⁷ This is not surprising given Israel’s history of preventing other countries in the Middle East from developing nuclear capability, as well as the sort of military exercises described above. In 1981, the Israeli Air Force conducted a surprise attack in which it destroyed Iraq’s nuclear plant at Osirak. In 2007, Israel carried out a similar attack, this time destroying a nuclear facility secretly being built in Syria.⁸⁸ The Iranian case is factually different — Israel never

attacked. But it is also qualitatively different: Rather than attacking, Israel deliberately created the impression of an impending unilateral attack and then harnessed this perception in a deliberate effort to limit Obama’s flexibility, influence U.S. policy, and alter Iran’s strategic calculus.

It was not until late 2011, however, that general concern about an Israeli attack on Iran turned into genuine alarm. As one television report in Israel put it, “After years of just threats, it seems that the ground has started to shake.”⁸⁹ U.S. intelligence agencies detected stepped-up activity by the Israeli military that appeared to presage a possible strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities.⁹⁰ On Oct. 3, 2011, Panetta arrived in Israel for what was described as an “urgent discussion” on Iran.⁹¹ That the main impetus for his trip was U.S. alarm about a potential Israeli strike was reflected in Panetta’s public statement in Israel that “the most effective way to deal with Iran is not on a unilateral basis.”⁹² The United States and Israel, he added, must confront all challenges “together.”⁹³ In his private meetings, Panetta demanded — and was refused — early warning in the event that Israel decided to attack.⁹⁴ The U.S. sense of urgency manifested in numerous other ways. In early November, a U.S. military official said that Washington had

84 For instance, in late July 2009, standing alongside U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Barak once again reaffirmed that “at this stage, the priority should be given, still, to diplomacy and probably sanctions.” See “Defense Minister Barak meets with US Secretary of Defense Gates,” Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 27, 2009. Asked about a potential Israeli attack on Iran, Gates replied that, in his meetings in Israel, “I had every sense that the Israeli government is prepared to let our strategy play out in terms of trying to use a combination of diplomatic pressures, economic sanctions and other peaceful means to try to get the Iranian government to change its mind in terms of its nuclear ambitions.” See Jim Garamone, “Gates Praises U.S., Jordan Strategic Partnership,” Department of Defense, July 27, 2009, <http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=55267>; “Press Conference with Secretary Gates and Israeli Defense Minister Barak,” Ministry of Defense, April 27, 2010. In the joint press conference between Gates and Barak in March 2011, the topic of Iran was overshadowed by the events of the Arab Spring. See “Joint Press Conference with Secretary Gates and Minister Barak from Tel Aviv, Israel,” Department of Defense, March 24, 2011, <http://archive.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4797>.

85 “Interview of the President by Yonit Levi, Israeli TV,” White House Office of the Press Secretary, July 8, 2010, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/interview-president-yonit-levi-israeli-tv>.

86 Author interview with Daniel B. Shapiro, Tel Aviv, Jan. 10, 2018.

87 Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Point of No Return,” *Atlantic* (September 2010), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/09/the-point-of-no-return/308186/>; Emily Alpert, “Will Israel Attack Iran? It’s Been Asked Before,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 3, 2012, http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/world_now/2012/02/will-israel-attack-iran-its-been-asked-before.html.

88 As Panetta noted, “Everybody understood that when you look at the history here, Israel was a nation that if it thought that its existence was threatened in any way it would take action with or without the United States.” The former defense secretary cited Israel’s attacks on the Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007 and the Iraqi nuclear plant in 1981 as indicative of Israeli determination to remove potential existential threats. Author telephone interview with Leon Panetta, Aug. 12, 2016.

89 “Meet the Press,” Channel 2, Dec. 3, 2011.

90 Solomon, *The Iran Wars*, 197–98.

91 Amos Harel and Reuters, “U.S. Defense Secretary to Arrive in Israel to Discuss Iran Nuclear Program,” *Haaretz*, Oct. 3, 2011.

92 “Israel ‘Increasingly Isolated’ in Middle East: US,” *Agence France-Presse*, Oct. 3, 2011, <https://gs.geo.tv/latest/31185-israel-increasingly-isolated-in-middle-east-us>.

93 Yaakov Katz, “International Community Needs to Cooperate on Iran,” *Jerusalem Post*, Oct. 4, 2011.

94 Ron Ben-Yishai, “IDF Is Already Prepared to Attack in Iran,” *Ynet*, Nov. 3, 2011; Barak Ravid, “Netanyahu and Barak Refused to Commit to Not Attacking Iran Without Coordinating with the United States,” *Haaretz*, Nov. 6, 2011; and author interview with Ehud Barak, New York, May 31, 2016.

enhanced its “watchfulness” of both Israel and Iran.⁹⁵ The United States then bolstered its contingency military planning in the Middle East and augmented its intelligence-gathering on Israel. Obama, Panetta, and other top officials conveyed a string of private messages to Israel, warning of the “dire consequences of a strike.”⁹⁶ In addition, U.S. intelligence agencies began to closely monitor Israel’s military bases and eavesdrop on its secret communications for indications of a forthcoming strike. The United States detected when Israeli pilots were put on alert and identified moonless nights, which would give the Israelis better cover for a strike.⁹⁷ Other U.S. surveillance activities included spying on the prime minister’s office and hacking into Israeli drone and fighter-jet surveillance feeds in search of indications of preparations for a strike.⁹⁸ In December 2011, Shapiro drafted a cable in which he later recalled stressing that the United States “could not in any way rule out the possibility” of an uncoordinated Israeli strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities.⁹⁹ That month, Panetta publicly warned that if Israel attacked Iran,

The United States would obviously be blamed and we could possibly be the target of retaliation from Iran, striking our ships, striking our military bases. ... the

consequence could be that we would have an escalation that would take place that would not only involve many lives, but I think could consume the Middle East in a confrontation and a conflict that we would regret.¹⁰⁰

In January 2012, National Security Adviser Tom Donilon informed Panetta that Obama’s twin foreign policy goals for that year were to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon and “to avoid a war in the Middle East,”¹⁰¹ the latter being the scenario the administration feared would result from an Israeli strike.¹⁰² As senior *New York Times* correspondent David Sanger wrote, the “outbreak of a public debate in Israel over whether to strike soon clearly shook the Obama administration.”¹⁰³ In February 2012, Panetta spoke of a “strong likelihood” that Israel would strike before June.¹⁰⁴ It was against this backdrop that the *Associated Press* wrote, “For the first time in nearly two decades of escalating tensions over Iran’s nuclear program, world leaders are genuinely concerned that an Israeli military attack on the Islamic Republic could be imminent.”¹⁰⁵ This sense of urgency was confirmed in later interviews with multiple senior Obama administration officials, including Panetta,¹⁰⁶ Deputy Secretary of State

95 Barbara Starr, “U.S. Concerned Israel Could Strike Iran,” *CNN Security Clearance Blog*, Nov. 4, 2011, <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2011/11/04/u-s-concerned-israel-could-strike-iran/>.

96 Adam Entous, Julian E. Barnes, and Jay Solomon, “U.S. Warns Israel on Strike,” *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 14, 2012, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970204409004577159202556087074>.

97 Adam Entous, “Spy vs. Spy: Inside the Fraying U.S.-Israel Ties,” *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 22, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/spy-vs-spy-inside-the-fraying-u-s-israel-ties-1445562074>.

98 Adam Entous and Danny Yadron, “U.S. Spy Net on Israel Snares Congress,” *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 29, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-spy-net-on-israel-snares-congress-1451425210>; Cora Currier and Henrik Moltke, “Spies in the Skies,” *Intercept*, Jan. 28, 2016.

99 Interview with Daniel B. Shapiro, Tel Aviv, Jan. 11, 2018. In an indication of the credibility he attributed to this scenario, Shapiro noted that he disseminated the cable to an especially broad audience so as to “protect myself” in case Israel indeed attacked Iran.

100 “Remarks by Secretary of Defense Leon E. Panetta at the Saban Center,” Department of Defense, Dec. 2, 2011, <http://archive.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4937>.

101 Panetta, *Worthy Fights*, 404.

102 Thom Shanker, Helene Cooper, and Ethan Bronner, “U.S. Sees Iran Attacks as Likely if Israel Strikes,” *New York Times*, Feb. 29, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/29/world/middleeast/us-sees-iran-attacks-as-likely-if-israel-strikes.html>; and Mark Mazzetti and Thom Shanker, “U.S. War Game Sees Perils of Israeli Strike Against Iran,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/20/world/middleeast/united-states-war-game-sees-dire-results-of-an-israeli-attack-on-iran.html>.

103 David E. Sanger, “Confronting Iran in a Year of Elections,” *New York Times*, Jan. 21, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/sunday-review/confronting-iran-in-a-year-of-elections.html>.

104 David Ignatius, “Is Israel Preparing to Attack Iran?” *Washington Post*, Feb. 2, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/is-israel-preparing-to-attack-iran/2012/02/02/gIqANjfkQ_story.html. Another U.S. official said later that month, “We believe that Israel has not yet decided whether to attack or not, but it is clear to us that the matter is being weighed seriously.” See Barak Ravid and Natasha Mozgovaya, “National Security Adviser Visiting Israel,” *Haaretz*, Feb. 18, 2012.

105 Dan Perry and Josef Federman “Just a Bluff? Fears Grow of Israeli Attack on Iran,” *Associated Press*, Feb. 5, 2012, <http://www.staradvertiser.com/2012/02/05/breaking-news/just-a-bluff-fears-grow-of-israeli-attack-on-iran/>.

106 Panetta said, “My conclusion, and I think the conclusion of the National Security Council and the president, was that Israel was giving serious consideration to this possibility.” Author telephone interview with Leon Panetta, Aug. 12, 2016.

William Burns,¹⁰⁷ National Security Council member and senior Obama adviser Gary Samore,¹⁰⁸ and Shapiro.¹⁰⁹ The following section analyzes the various tactics Israel employed to create the perception of an impending military strike, instill a sense of urgency in the United States, and limit Obama's room to maneuver.

How Israel Generated and Harnessed the War Scare

This section explores the primary methods by which Israel exacerbated the Obama administration's concerns and led its senior ally to infer that a unilateral military assault on Iran could be imminent.

Military Moves Designed to Be Picked Up by U.S. Intelligence

Israel's efforts to manipulate Washington into thinking a strike could be imminent included sensitive military activities designed to be intercepted by the United States, as well as actions bearing an intelligence signature too noticeable to conceal. For example, according to one Israeli report citing multiple sources, Israel carried out a significant covert measure in early October 2011 that pertained to the "diplomatic-security" realm, and was widely perceived by the sources as a sign that preparations for an attack had "shifted up a gear."¹¹⁰ The report did not detail the exact nature of the covert measure, but, since then, it has been revealed that, in 2011, the Mossad and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) were ordered to begin preparations for a possible military strike on Iran within 15 days.¹¹¹ It was also in late 2011 that U.S. intelligence agencies reportedly had detected Israeli aircraft entering and exiting Iran's airspace, supposedly probing

the country's air defenses. This appeared to be a dry run for a commando raid on a nuclear site and was sufficiently alarming to merit the deployment of a second U.S. aircraft carrier to the region.¹¹² On another occasion, multiple U.S. intelligence sources said the United States had learned that Israel, through a series of quiet understandings, had been granted access to airbases across Iran's northern border in Azerbaijan.¹¹³ Barak himself would later acknowledge instances in which Israel was "on the verge" of an attack and units "had entered a state of preparedness,"¹¹⁴ but a senior military analyst later revealed that some of these instances "were designed to motivate the U.S. administration and



the Europeans to increase the pressure on Iran and bring the Americans to a stage in which they would wield a military option and would be ready to use it."¹¹⁵ Tamir Pardo, then-director of the Mossad, similarly raised the possibility that, when he was instructed in 2011 by the prime minister to enter a state of preparedness and stand ready for an attack on Iran within 15 days, Netanyahu was "signaling"

107 Burns added, "There was a genuine concern that the Israeli government might launch such a strike." Author telephone interview with William Burns, June 15, 2017.

108 Author interviews with Gary Samore, Obama's coordinator for weapons of mass destruction, counterterrorism, and arms control, Cambridge, Mass., March 21, 2016 and March 9, 2017. According to Samore, with the exception of Vice President Joseph Biden, "who thought it was all a big bluff," the most senior members of the administration, including Obama and Panetta, felt "pressured" by Israel's signals.

109 Interview with Daniel B. Shapiro, Tel Aviv, Jan. 11, 2018. According to Shapiro, "We did take it seriously; Obama took it seriously."

110 Yossi Verter, "Iran, Who Knows," *Haaretz*, Nov. 4, 2011.

111 "Uvda with Ilana Dayan," Channel 2, June 2, 2018.

112 Entous, "Spy vs. Spy."

113 Mark Perry, "Israel's Secret Staging Ground," *Foreign Policy*, March 28, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/03/28/israels-secret-staging-ground/>.

114 Ilan Kfir and Danny Dor, *Barak: Milkhamot Hayay [Barak: Battles of My Life]* (Tel Aviv: Kinneret Zmora-Bitan, 2015), 330.

115 Ron Ben-Yishai, "Israel Has Understood: Only the U.S. Will Stop Iran," *Ynet*, Aug. 3, 2012.

to the United States “to do something.”¹¹⁶ Given that the United States, as Panetta later noted, had “fail-safe methods of determining whether or not in fact planes and pilots and crews were all being prepared for action,”¹¹⁷ Washington was likely receiving real-time indications of such activities. Barak later admitted that Israel was acting on the premise that Washington was capable of monitoring its activities and that the United States inferred from Israel's intelligence efforts that “we were getting ready.”¹¹⁸ Explaining the perception of an imminent strike, Barak said, “The atmosphere was a reflection of our actual real preparations. The Americans were following us, watching what we were doing and what the Air Force was rehearsing.”¹¹⁹

Strict Secrecy to Achieve Message Discipline

A core element of Israel's pressure campaign pertained to the way Netanyahu and Barak deliberately kept their various alarmed audiences — namely Israel's defense establishment, the cabinet, and the United States — at arm's length. From Barak's vantage point, keeping Israel's establishment in the dark was crucial for the success of the campaign. Israel's security chiefs opposed a unilateral strike, and, as Barak would later reveal, he and Netanyahu knew that some of them were talking to their U.S. counterparts “on a daily basis.”¹²⁰ By holding their cards extremely close, Netanyahu and Barak prevented leaks, maximized their message control, enhanced their credibility and bargaining leverage, and kept their various audiences guessing. Barak and Netanyahu

made all cabinet members sign an additional protocol of secrecy prohibiting them not only from making statements on Iran but also from giving strictly-off-record briefings.¹²¹ As National Security Adviser Yaakov Amidror put it, “Nothing leaked because ... the ministers knew nothing.” Although Amidror claims to have been one of a handful of Israelis who were truly in the know, his statement that “I personally believe they were serious, I truly believed they were not bluffing” implies that the national security adviser, too, was in the dark about Netanyahu and Barak's actual intentions.¹²² And he was not the only senior Israeli official to find himself in that position. Asked in January 2012 whether Netanyahu and Barak were truly serious about an attack, a “very high-ranking intelligence source,” likely the head of the IDF Military Intelligence Directorate, replied, “I don't know, there are only two people who know the answer to this question, and they are Netanyahu and Barak.”¹²³ Two months later, a senior Israeli official said of the two men, “Together, they control this issue.”¹²⁴ When asked about the possibility that a unilateral attack was never truly intended to take place, then-Mossad Director Pardo retrospectively admitted, “The same doubts that you raise now — I had them all along.” Pardo hypothesized that “a deception at this level requires that no more than one or two people be in the loop,” meaning that, if the Israeli campaign was intentionally deceptive, the deception was conducted either by “the prime minister alone, or the prime minister and Barak. And all the rest, including yours truly, were among those who were being duped.”¹²⁵ Even if Pardo had

116 “Uvda with Ilana Dayan,” Channel 2, June 2, 2018. According to the program, the Mossad and the IDF were ordered in 2011 to begin preparations for a possible military strike on Iran within 15 days. Referring to this step, Pardo said when a leader orders such a move, “It can serve one of two purposes. The first is that he really means it. The other possibility is that he is signaling so that somebody out there will know about it — maybe even that someone in the United States will find out about it in one way or another — and that someone will be motivated to do something.”

117 Author telephone interview with Leon Panetta, Aug. 12, 2016.

118 Author interview with Ehud Barak, New York, May 31, 2016.

119 Author telephone interview with Ehud Barak, April 26, 2016.

120 Barnea, “Why We Did Not Attack Iran.” Shedding more light on this point, Shapiro noted that the United States knew that Israel's security chiefs opposed a military attack: “Without being disloyal to their political leadership they found ways of conveying to us that they were not advocating for it and to some degree were resisting it. This was knowable.” Interview with Daniel B. Shapiro, Tel Aviv, Jan. 11, 2018.

121 Author interview with Ehud Barak, New York, May 31, 2016.

122 Author telephone interview with Yaakov Amidror, June 9, 2016.

123 Rachel Nolan, “Behind the Cover Story: Ronen Bergman on Whether Israel Will Attack Iran,” *New York Times*, Jan. 30, 2012, <https://6thfloor.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/30/behind-the-cover-story-ronen-bergman-on-israeli-plans-to-strike-iran/>. See also Ethan Bronner, “2 Israeli Leaders Make the Iran Issue Their Own,” *New York Times*, March 27, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/28/world/middleeast/netanyahu-and-barak-bond-over-israels-iran-crisis.html>.

124 Bronner, “2 Israeli Leaders.”

125 Author interview with Tamir Pardo, Cambridge, Mass., May 2, 2016. That the Mossad chief himself was kept at arm's length can be inferred from his assertion that whether or not a unilateral attack was genuinely in the cards was an “irrelevant” question for him as Mossad director: “For an operational organization, it makes absolutely no difference if it is a deception or not. I have to play along to the fullest extent, because I do not know.”



his doubts and, referring to the possibility of a unilateral Israeli attack, “did not believe that this could happen,” he still admits that when the prime minister “tells me to commence the countdown, you realize that he is not playing games with you. These things [entering a state of preparedness] have enormous implications. It’s not something he is allowed to do only as a drill.”¹²⁶ Cabinet member

A core element of Israel’s pressure campaign pertained to the way Netanyahu and Barak deliberately kept their various alarmed audiences... at arm’s length.

Dan Meridor, who served as Israel’s intelligence minister at the time, and theoretically should have been in the know, admitted that he had “spent nights and days” with the intelligence chiefs “asking ourselves what was going to happen. ... I could not just assume that it was all a show.”¹²⁷ Amos Gilead, then-Director of Policy and Political-Military Affairs at the Ministry of Defense, similarly admits that “we will never be able to know” if Netanyahu and Barak “really meant it,” although “according to every parameter they acted as if they did.”¹²⁸ Beyond the message clarity gained by such tactics, this information asymmetry made it significantly more difficult for the United States to affect Israel’s decision-making.

Israeli Refusal to Provide Advance Warning

Diplomacy was the basic means by which Israel

first indicated to the United States the shift in its approach toward the Iranian issue and its refusal to coordinate its moves with its senior ally. In November 2011, a top U.S. military official said that Israeli reassurances to Washington that it would receive early warning if Israel decided to strike Iran no longer seemed “ironclad.”¹²⁹ This implies that Israel had previously provided such an assurance to the United States.¹³⁰ Later that month, when Martin Dempsey, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, was asked if Israel would alert the United States ahead of an attack on Iran, he replied, “I don’t know.”¹³¹ In January 2012, the United States received yet another powerful signal when Barak informed Panetta of Israel’s decision to call off a joint military exercise scheduled for May. A biography of Barak claims that this exercise was delayed ahead of a “decisive session” regarding Iran.¹³² In his memoir, Panetta recalls pressing Barak “to reconsider the cancellation,” to which the Israeli defense minister replied that, although Israel had not yet made a decision about whether to strike Iran, “I can’t in good conscience hide the fact from our best ally that we are discussing it.”¹³³ Barak later recalled, “Panetta realized that Israel was serious, and asked for a two-week early warning. I told him, no. Not two weeks, and not even 24 hours. However, I did tell Panetta that we would give them a sufficiently long early warning so as to not jeopardize any American soldier in the Middle East.”¹³⁴ Whereas the cancellation was likely designed to alarm Washington, an entirely different signal was conveyed to the Israeli public. Domestically, the cancellation was falsely portrayed as a joint decision resulting from U.S. budgetary constraints and a mutual desire to avoid sending a bellicose signal to Iran.¹³⁵ Two days later, Barak told IDF Radio that an Israeli

126 "Uvda with Ilana Dayan," Channel 2, June 2, 2018.

127 Author telephone interview with Dan Meridor, June 7, 2016.

128 Author interview with Gen. (Ret.) Amos Gilead, Herzliya, July 29, 2018.

129 Starr, "U.S. Concerned."

130 For instance, asked in July 2010 whether he was concerned Israel might decide to unilaterally attack Iran, Obama replied that relations were "sufficiently strong" that neither would "try to surprise each other." He went on to say, "We try to coordinate on issues of mutual concern. And that approach is one that I think Prime Minister Netanyahu is committed to." See "Interview of the President by Yonit Levi, Israeli TV."

131 Phil Stewart, "U.S. Uncertain Israel Would Advise Before Iran Strike," *Reuters*, Nov. 30, 2011, <https://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/idCATRE7AT2TT20111130?sp=true>.

132 Kfir and Dor, *Barak: Milkhamot Hayay [Barak: Battles of My Life]*, 319–20.

133 Panetta, *Worthy Fights*, 406.

134 Author interview with Ehud Barak, New York, May 31, 2016.

135 Attila Somfalvi and Yoav Zitun, "Israel-U.S. Aerial Defense Exercise Postponed," *Ynet*, Jan. 15, 2012; Shlomo Tsezna and Lilach Shoval, "The Exercise Was Postponed So As 'Not to Warm Up the Region,'" *Yisrael Hayom*, Jan. 16, 2012.

decision to attack Iran was “very far off.”¹³⁶ In other words, Barak tailored different signals to different target audiences. If Israel had intended to set off alarm bells in Washington and manipulate its anticipation of violence, it succeeded. Within days, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff landed in Israel for high-level discussions,¹³⁷ and Panetta told the *Washington Post* that there was a “strong likelihood” of an Israeli attack on Iran before spring 2012.¹³⁸

Media Campaign

Israel's public media campaign dates to Oct. 12, 2011, a day when the entire Israeli media agenda was dominated by the dramatic announcement of a prisoner-exchange agreement between Israel and Hamas. One particular analysis stands out: In a column with the headline “It's All Because of Iran,” *Yediot Aharonot* veteran military analyst Alex Fishman argued that the main impetus behind the prisoner swap was Netanyahu's desire to “clear the desk” and “set the stage for something different, bigger, and more important.” When one looks for signs of worry in Netanyahu and Barak, Fishman continued, “it somehow always has to do with Iran. ... What is happening exactly with respect to the Iranian issue? It is unclear. But it is clear that this is going to be the next hot story.”¹³⁹ Fishman's column was the bellwether of an official effort to spark an intense public debate about Iran.¹⁴⁰

An especially interesting case in point is the apparent use of the daily *Yisrael Hayom*, known for its intimate ties to Netanyahu, as a signaling device. In March 2012, the paper published as its banner headline a lengthy opinion column by its editor-in-chief, Amos Regev, who strongly advocated for an Israeli attack. The article concluded, “With

the Americans or without them, it will be hard. It will be bold. It is doable.” A photo of three Israeli fighter jets flying over Auschwitz accompanied the article.¹⁴¹ Alarmed by the column, *Haaretz* editor-in-chief Aluf Benn posted a reaction piece later that morning in which he argued that Netanyahu's signals “are indeed preparations for war and not a bluff,” adding that Regev “is writing what Netanyahu cannot say in speeches.”¹⁴²

International media outlets also played a role in Israel's pressure campaign. In January 2012, the *New York Times* Sunday supplement dedicated its cover story to the prospect of an Israeli attack on Iran. The article, by well-connected Israeli journalist Ronen Bergman, concluded, “After speaking with many senior Israeli leaders and chiefs of the military and the intelligence, I have come to believe that Israel will indeed strike Iran in 2012.”¹⁴³ The following day, Bergman's conclusion prompted a debate in the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Asked about the article, U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper commented that this “is a matter that we are very, very concerned about.”¹⁴⁴ Clapper, who later characterized the Israeli campaign as an “attempt to pressure the United States,” suspected the article was in some way an Israeli initiative:

When you've got rhetoric like that, you have to wonder how did that article get planted. The Israelis know us, they play us like a fiddle. They know how our Congress works — they play to that. They know how our media works — they influence that. So, sure, every time you have rhetoric like that, you have to be concerned. I didn't think it was appropriate to blow it off.¹⁴⁵

136 “Ma Bo'er With Razi Barkai,” IDF Radio, Jan. 18, 2012.

137 Isabel Kershner, “U.S. General Urges Closer Ties with Israel,” *New York Times*, Jan. 20, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/21/world/middleeast/joint-chiefs-chairman-martin-dempsey-visits-israel.html>.

138 Ignatius, “Is Israel Preparing to Attack Iran?”

139 Alex Fishman, “It's All Because of Iran,” *Yediot Aharonot*, Oct. 12, 2011.

140 Senior Israeli military affairs analyst Ben-Yishai would later note that the Israeli government itself had initiated this debate. See Ben-Yishai, “The IDF Is Already Prepared for Attack on Iran.” Moreover, a *Haaretz* military affairs analyst later alluded to Barak as the source behind these messages. See Amos Harel, “Barak Reveals in the United States Considerations for Possible Israeli Strike on Iran,” *Haaretz*, Jan. 27, 2012.

141 Amos Regev, “Difficult, Courageous, Doable,” *Yisrael Hayom*, March 15, 2012.

142 Aluf Benn, “Netanyahu Issues Order 8 to Himself and the Public,” *Haaretz*, March 15, 2012.

143 Ronen Bergman, “Will Israel Attack Iran?” *New York Times*, Jan. 25, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/29/magazine/will-israel-attack-iran.html>.

144 “Current and Projected National Security Threats to the United States,” Hearing Before the Select Committee on Intelligence, 112th Congress, Second Session, Jan. 31, 2012.

145 Author telephone interview with James Clapper, May 12, 2017. Clapper recalls interpreting Israel's signals as “a combination of genuine concern and an attempt to pressure the United States. ... I thought this had more to do with information warfare, if you will, information influence.”

Public Statements

Israel's public statements regarding a possible strike on Iran, made almost exclusively by Netanyahu and Barak, featured a single recurring theme: Israel was entitled, capable, and prepared to look after its vital interests. For instance, on Nov. 1, 2011, Barak remarked that "events in the Middle East over the past year" show that "there can emerge situations in which Israel will have to protect its own interests" by itself and not rely on "other powers."¹⁴⁶ Although he would later claim to have been referring to the events of the Arab Spring, Barak's statement was widely perceived as a signal that Israel might strike Iran unilaterally.¹⁴⁷ The following month, speaking at the annual memorial ceremony for Israel's founder, David Ben-Gurion, Netanyahu alluded to the ongoing debate over Iran. Ben-Gurion, he said, had "a very hard time gaining support" within pre-state Israel for the declaration of independence in 1948. "Huge pressure," he said,

was exerted on Ben-Gurion, from within and from without, not to make this move. ... Everyone told him: this is not the time, not now. Among those pressuring him were important statesmen and friends. ... All of us are here today because Ben-Gurion made the right decision at the right time. ... I want to believe that we will always act with responsibility, courage, and determination to make the right decisions to ensure our future and security.¹⁴⁸

These remarks coincided with a statement by Barak stressing that "Israel cannot exempt itself from making decisions as a sovereign [country]. If the [Iranian] program can be stopped with diplomacy, that's great, but all options are on the

table. ... Israel is responsible for its own security, future, and existence."¹⁴⁹ Clearly, Israel's goal was to signal to the United States that it had the sovereign right to safeguard its vital interests.

Lobbying U.S. Congress

To impact U.S. decision-making on Iran, Israel harnessed multiple Washington-based, pro-Israel organizations.¹⁵⁰ But Israel also worked directly with members of Congress to influence the Obama administration. Visiting Israel in November 2011, a group of U.S. lawmakers updated their interlocutors about a new initiative — legislation urging the White House to support Israel's "right" to employ "any means necessary" to confront the Iranian nuclear threat.¹⁵¹ In February 2012, Netanyahu discussed the Iranian issue with a group of U.S. senators, headed by Sen. John McCain.¹⁵² It was reported that Netanyahu had asked senior senators and members of Congress to exert pressure on Obama regarding the Iranian issue.¹⁵³ In early 2013, the Senate passed a resolution calling on the United States to support and "stand with Israel" if Jerusalem is "compelled to take military action in legitimate self-defense against Iran's nuclear weapons program."¹⁵⁴ Congress's role in promoting tough sanctions — and essentially forcing them upon a more reluctant White House — is discussed in more detail later in the article.

Israel used the above-discussed tactics to create the perception of a potentially imminent military attack on Iran, instill a sense of urgency in the United States, and push the Obama administration to adopt a tougher approach toward Iran than it would have pursued otherwise. How did this play out, and how effective was Israel's pressure campaign? Was Israel able to get its way, despite clear U.S. superiority, or did the senior ally

146 Evening Newscast, Channel 10, Nov. 1, 2011.

147 Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu Consolidating Majority in the Cabinet for Military Attack on Iran's Nuclear Facilities," *Haaretz*, Nov. 2, 2011; Evening Newscast, Channel 10, Nov. 1, 2011; "In Israel, Speculation Over Strike on Iran Grows," *Agence France-Presse*, Nov. 2, 2011.

148 "Prime Minister's Speech at the David Ben-Gurion Memorial Ceremony," [YouTube], Dec. 4, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGyHmhkMqqg>.

149 Shlomo Tsezna, "Netanyahu Drops Heavy Hints in Speech," *Yisrael Hayom*, Dec. 5, 2011.

150 For example, see Eli Clifton and Ali Gharib, "How the Anti-Iran Lobby Machine Dominates Capitol Hill," *Nation*, July 15, 2014.

151 Mati Tuchfeld and Boaz Bismuth, "Congressional Initiative: United States Will Support Israeli Attack on Iran," *Israel Hayom*, Nov. 16, 2011.

152 Raphael Ahren, "John McCain says US and Israel Drifting Apart on Iran Issue," *Times of Israel*, Feb. 21, 2012, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/john-mccain-says-us-and-israel-drifting-apart-on-iran-issue/>.

153 Barak Ravid, "Prime Minister to Ask Obama to Threaten to Attack Iran," *Haaretz*, Feb. 29, 2012, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.1652900>.

154 "S. Res. 65 — A resolution strongly supporting the full implementation of United States and international sanctions on Iran and urging the President to continue to strengthen enforcement of sanctions legislation," 113th Congress, May 22, 2013.

essentially prevail? These questions are the focus of the remainder of the article. The next section analyzes the manner in which the United States, in reaction to Israel's pressure campaign, leveraged elements of its overwhelming influence to restrain its junior ally.

U.S. Counter-Pressure: Dissuasion, Dissociation, and Reassurance

Far from being a passive receiver and perceiver of Israeli signals and pressure tactics, the United States engaged in measures of its own to dissuade its junior ally from attacking Iran. This had become a top U.S. foreign policy priority, one that Panetta would describe as his primary task as secretary of defense.¹⁵⁵ Going even further, Samore claimed that “Much of U.S. strategy at that time was built around ‘how do we stop the Israelis from attacking.’ In some ways, that became the more immediate objective than stopping Iran.”¹⁵⁶ Some of this played out in public view as the crisis unfolded, such as when a senior administration official said, “We’re trying to make the decision to attack as hard as possible for Israel.”¹⁵⁷ To resist Israeli pressure and ensure compliance, the United States utilized a variety of dissuasion instruments. What follows is a discussion of the most salient ones.

Publicly Questioning the Prudence of an Israeli Attack

U.S. opposition to an Israeli attack was expressed by senior officials from the outset of the Israeli campaign. With time, this sentiment grew increasingly blunt. In February 2012, the *New York Times* ran a front-page article citing U.S. experts as casting doubt on Israel's military capacity to successfully attack Iran.¹⁵⁸ Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Dempsey publicly described an Israeli attack as both “destabilizing” and “not prudent,” saying Israel would fail to achieve its “long-term objectives.”¹⁵⁹ Seeking to undermine the credibility of Israel's military option, Dempsey later said that an Israeli attack would “delay but probably not destroy” the Iranian program.¹⁶⁰ In August 2012, an Israeli daily newspaper cited a U.S. warning to Israel to the effect that Saudi Arabia would forcefully resist any Israeli attempt to use its airspace to attack Iran.¹⁶¹

Signaling Potential Dissociation from Israel

In reference to a unilateral Israeli strike, Dempsey alluded to the possibility of U.S. military dissociation from Israel, saying at a press conference: “I don’t want to be complicit if they choose to do it.”¹⁶² Days later, *Yediot Aharonot* reported that the United States had informed Iran that it would not back an Israeli attack on its nuclear facilities — as long as Iran steered clear of U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf.¹⁶³

Stalling for Time

For several months, Washington kept a steady flow of senior American officials traveling to Israel in part of what U.S. officials depicted as a deliberate strategy to forestall such an attack.

155 David Samuels, “The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama's Foreign-Policy Guru,” *New York Times*, May 5, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/the-aspiring-novelist-who-became-obamas-foreign-policy-guru.html>.

156 Author interview with Gary Samore, Cambridge, Mass., March 21, 2016.

157 Wilson, “In Meeting.”

158 Bumiller, “Iran Raid.”

159 “US' Dempsey says Premature to Attack Iran Now,” *Reuters*, Feb. 19, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usa/us-dempsey-says-premature-to-attack-iran-now-idUSTRE81I0K420120219>.

160 Richard Norton-Taylor, “Israeli Attack on Iran ‘Would Not Stop Nuclear Programme,’” *Guardian*, Aug. 30, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/30/israeli-attack-iran-not-stop-nuclear>.

161 Shimon Shiffer, “The Message Israel Received via the United States — Saudi Arabia Says: We Will Intercept Israeli Aircrafts on Way to Iran,” *Yediot Aharonot*, Aug. 9, 2012.

162 Norton-Taylor, “Israeli Attack.”

163 Shimon Shiffer, “Iran Must Steer Clear of US Interests in Gulf,” *Ynetnews*, Sept. 3, 2012.



According to Shapiro, the former U.S. ambassador, “We used all the dissuasion tactics and tools of dissuasion we could think of,” including high-level visits. “You buy yourself three weeks at a time. The week or two before the visit, the week or two after the visit. That tempo was all relevant to us. There were other factors, but it was definitely part of our strategy.”¹⁶⁴ Samore noted in this regard that the administration was “certainly watching Israel very closely. That’s part of the reason why people went every two weeks. Because they figured that Israel couldn’t launch an attack when the vice president was on his way, or Tom Donilon was on his way, or Gen. Dempsey was on his way.” Samore described this as “a very conscious, deliberate strategy to stop the Israelis from attacking.”¹⁶⁵

Amplification of Domestic Opposition in Israel to a Strike

The United States also worked to influence Israeli public opinion by exposing the fact that Israel’s own security chiefs opposed a unilateral strike. In July 2012, the banner headline of *Yediot Aharonot* cited “sources in the United States” as saying that Israel’s military and security chiefs were unanimous in their opposition to an Israeli strike on Iran.¹⁶⁶ The Obama administration also leveraged its influence with Israel’s president and elder statesman, Shimon Peres. In June 2012, Obama honored Peres at the White House with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.¹⁶⁷ The next month, Peres began to express scathing opposition to a unilateral attack and to underline his trust in Obama’s determination to prevent Iran from ever obtaining a nuclear bomb.¹⁶⁸ In mid-August, Peres said that “after having talks with” Obama he was “convinced” that Israel could trust the U.S. president on the issue of Iran. “Now, it’s clear to us that we can’t do it alone. ... It’s clear to us we have to proceed together with America. There are

questions about coordination and timing, but as serious as the danger is, this time at least we are not alone.”¹⁶⁹

Israel’s War Scare Ends: Assessing its Strategic Impact

These measures were designed to restrain Israel while also maintaining flexibility for Obama. To the degree that an Israeli attack was genuinely being planned, U.S. pressure ultimately prevailed without the United States having to resort to far-reaching threats or taking action. Although it is difficult to identify a specific time when Israel’s military option came off the table, one can point to September 2012 as a turning point in terms of Israel’s credibility with the United States, which practically collapsed in the wake of a reassuring message that Barak privately conveyed to Obama. According to several

If entrapment was ever a genuine possibility, the United States clearly evaded being chain-ganged into a military confrontation.

accounts, Barak met with Obama’s confidant Rahm Emanuel and told him, without having updated Netanyahu, that he no longer favored a strike.¹⁷⁰ Then, on Sept. 27, 2012, Netanyahu delivered a speech before the U.N. General Assembly in which he publicly drew a red line to Iran but also pushed the critical stage of Iran’s nuclear program to “next spring” and possibly even “next summer.”¹⁷¹ It was with these last words, widely interpreted as a “nod

164 Author interview with Daniel B. Shapiro, Tel Aviv, Jan. 10, 2018.

165 Author interview with Gary Samore, Cambridge, Mass., March 21, 2016.

166 Shimon Shiffer, “Not to Attack in Iran,” *Yediot Aharonot*, July 31, 2012.

167 “Remarks by President Obama and President Peres of Israel at Presentation of the Medal of Freedom,” White House Office of the Press Secretary, June 13, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/06/13/remarks-president-obama-and-president-peres-israel-presentation-medal-fr>.

168 Ronen Bergman, “Shimon Peres on Obama, Iran and the Path to Peace,” *New York Times*, Jan. 9, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/13/magazine/shimon-peres-on-obama-iran-and-the-path-to-peace.html>.

169 Jeffrey Heller, “Israel’s Peres Against Any Solo Iran Attack, Trusts Obama,” *Reuters*, Aug. 16, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-iran/israels-peres-against-any-solo-iran-attack-trusts-obama-idUSBRE87FOM620120816>.

170 Attila Somfalvi, “The Crisis With the U.S.: Barak Holds Secret Meeting With Rahm Emmanuel,” *Ynet*, Sept. 20, 2012; and Attila Somfalvi, “Netanyahu Summons Barak to Reprimand: Demands Clarifications,” *Ynet*, Oct. 6, 2012.

171 “PM Netanyahu’s Speech to the United Nations General Assembly in New York,” Prime Minister’s Office, Sept. 27, 2012, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA_Graphics/MFA_Gallery/2012/9/TRANSCRIPT_UN270912.pdf.

to Obama,” that Netanyahu removed the possibility of an imminent Israeli military strike on Iran.¹⁷² By “next summer” the United States and Iran were already deeply engaged in diplomatic talks and, for all intents and purposes, the military option was off the table.

Acceleration of Crippling Economic Sanctions on Iran

On the core issue of preventing an Israeli strike, especially in the critical run-up to the U.S. elections, the United States clearly got its way. The United States neither greenlighted an Israeli strike nor unleashed an attack of its own. Nor did Obama severely limit his latitude by making a binding commitment to use military force against Iran. If entrapment was ever a genuine possibility, the United States clearly evaded being chain-ganged into a military confrontation. In some respects, however, Washington’s counter-campaign appears not to have been entirely successful. To forestall an Israeli attack, Obama was compelled to pursue measures he otherwise probably would not have — and at a faster pace than he otherwise would have chosen. This means Israel succeeded in influencing U.S. policy.

Most notably, perhaps, the United States led an unprecedented international effort to cast Iran into economic isolation — an Israeli demand that the Obama administration initially was reluctant to pursue and had tried to keep in reserve.¹⁷³ Wary

of measures that could destabilize global markets, the executive branch, in the words of senior Treasury official Zarate, sought to strike a balance between increasing economic pressure and “not spooking the oil markets and spiking prices,”¹⁷⁴ a sentiment expressed in real time.¹⁷⁵ To force the Obama administration to escalate sanctions on Iran, Israel engaged in heavy lobbying on Capitol Hill. Sanctions against Iran’s oil sector and Central Bank were passed as part of the National Defense Authorization Act in December 2011. So strong was its support of Israel that the entire Senate unanimously voted in favor of sanctions.¹⁷⁶ Against this backdrop, Obama imposed unprecedented sanctions on Iran’s Central Bank and an embargo on Iran’s oil exports.¹⁷⁷ Sanger of the *New York Times* noted that, although “few in Washington are persuaded” that the sanctions would force Iran’s supreme leader to fold, “most go along with the assumption because the more forceful alternatives are too unpleasant to contemplate.”¹⁷⁸ The European Union soon imposed its own economic sanctions on Iran, including an oil embargo.¹⁷⁹ These sanctions would result in a 60 percent drop in Iranian crude oil exports from their pre-2011 rate.¹⁸⁰ And, in March 2012, in an unprecedented move enabled by the U.S. and E.U. sanctions, Iranian banks were disconnected from the SWIFT international financial system.¹⁸¹ Netanyahu would later attribute Iran’s economic isolation to Israel’s “projection of genuine resolve.”¹⁸² It is hard to definitively say whether Israel can claim the credit

172 Rick Gladstone and David E. Sanger, “Nod to Obama by Netanyahu on Iran Bomb,” *New York Times*, Sept. 28, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/28/world/middleeast/netanyahu-warns-that-iran-bombmaking-ability-is-nearer.html>.

173 Zarate, *Treasury's War*, 307–9, 314–16; Solomon, *The Iran Wars*, 194–95.

174 Zarate, *Treasury's War*, 307–9, 314–16.

175 In October 2011, U.S. officials expressed fear that “any crackdown on Iranian oil exports could drive up oil prices when the United States and European economies are weak.” As one senior official noted, “You don’t want to tip the U.S. into a downturn just to punish the Iranians.” See David E. Sanger and Mark Landler, “To Isolate Iran, U.S. Presses Inspectors on Nuclear Data,” *New York Times*, Oct. 15, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/16/world/middleeast/white-house-says-data-shows-iran-push-on-nuclear-arms.html>. The following month, the *New York Times* reported, “No one in the administration is willing to risk a step that could send prices soaring and, in the worst case, cause a confrontation at sea over a blockade.” David E. Sanger, “America’s Deadly Dynamics with Iran,” *New York Times*, Nov. 5, 2011. In January 2012, Sanger noted, “Obama has stopped short of advocating a global total embargo, which could lead to confrontations at sea.” Sanger, “Confronting Iran.”

176 Jennifer Rubin, “Senate Passes Iran Sanctions 100-0; Obama Objects (Really),” *Washington Post Right Turn Blog*, Dec. 2, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/post/senate-passes-iran-sanctions-100-0-obama-objects-really/2011/12/02/gIQA7yELKO_blog.html.

177 Interestingly, a pattern recurred in which, in the words of former Israeli ambassador to the United States Michael Oren, “The White House pushed back on sanctions bills, and then, once they passed, took credit for them.” See Michael B. Oren, *Ally: My Journey Across the American-Israeli Divide* (New York: Random House, 2015), 274. See also Josh Rogin, “White House Opposed New Iran Sanctions,” *Foreign Policy*, Nov. 30, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/11/30/white-house-opposed-new-iran-sanctions/>.

178 Sanger, “Confronting Iran.”

179 Solomon, *The Iran Wars*, 194–95.

180 Samore, *Sanctions Against Iran*, 15.

181 “Payments System SWIFT to Cut Off Iranian Banks,” *Reuters*, March 15, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-iran-sanctions/payments-system-swift-to-cut-off-iranian-banks-idUSBRE82E0VR20120315>.

182 “Uvda with Ilana Dayan,” Channel 2, Nov. 5, 2012.



for this outcome. However, the initial impetus for the toughest of U.S. sanctions came from a Congress strongly aligned with Israel. Consider the words of Sen. Robert Menendez, one of the driving forces behind the legislation. In December 2011, he said, “The clock is ticking. Published reports say we have about a year. Whenever you’re going to start our sanctions regime robustly, six months before the clock has been achieved? Before they get a nuclear weapon?”¹⁸³

Was rigorous implementation of the economic sanctions hastened as a result of Israel’s pressure and the perceived threat of a unilateral Israeli attack? Lending credence to this argument, Dennis Ross, who served as a senior director at the National Security Council and as special assistant to Obama, has written,

Israel was very much a factor in this approach. To forestall Israeli military action against what Israel perceived as an existential threat, the president understood we needed to show we could apply meaningful pressure on the Iranians that would alter their nuclear program.¹⁸⁴

For his part, Deputy Secretary of State Burns said that, although Obama would have eventually imposed sanctions regardless of Israel’s actions, Israel’s campaign “accelerated” the process. “Maybe [otherwise] it would have taken another year or so.” According to Burns, Obama “moved at a faster pace because of the concern of a potential Israeli military strike and the very real political pressure that existed in Washington in part because of the depth of the Israeli government’s concern.”¹⁸⁵ Making a similar argument, Shapiro said the United States “was motivated to go the extra mile in part to show the Israelis that they didn’t need to do something on their own, that we were serious. ... It’s fair to say that Israel probably did push us to go farther, faster on sanctions.”¹⁸⁶

Pointing to another important effect that Israel’s threat had on U.S. policy, senior Obama administration officials said the United States, while genuinely pressured by Israel’s signals, harnessed the perception of a credible Israeli strike in the service of persuading other actors to implement the debilitating sanctions on Iran. This included China, which had long opposed such measures.¹⁸⁷ Burns added,

We used it [the threat of an Israeli attack] with the Russians, we used it with the Chinese, with the Europeans, we used it with the Indians and those we were trying to persuade to curb oil purchases from Iran. It was a useful tool ... to maximize the economic pressure on the Iranians and to get other countries — mostly quite grudgingly — to go along with this, because it wasn’t in their economic interest in the short term in any way.¹⁸⁸

According to Shapiro, the perceived Israeli threat

was also in some way a useful tool for us in our discussion with other countries. ‘Hey, you know, the last thing you want is these crazy Israelis to go and do something, so let’s show them that there’s a better way. Let’s make these sanctions stick.’ I think it definitely affected the Chinese. ... There’s no question the Chinese would sit up in their chairs and listen intently if you would present this possibility of a serious Israeli strike.¹⁸⁹

In sum, according to Samore, “It sure helped to have the Israeli threat out there.”¹⁹⁰ This could be described as an amplification effect that may result from a relatively weak ally’s ability to establish a credible threat in the eyes of a much more powerful actor and influence its behavior.

183 Solomon, *The Iran Wars*, 200; Rubin, “Senate Passes Iran Sanctions 100-0.”

184 Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, 366–67. Zarate made the same point, noting that in early 2012, “The talk of preemptive war by Israel — which began to impact the public debate within Israeli society and in Washington, DC — made clear that more aggressive steps were necessary to avert war. ... The Israeli strategy was clear — it would use saber rattling to impel greater international economic and financial pressure. The world was moving into maximalist financial pressure mode on Iran to avoid war. Financial constriction needed to move to economic strangulation.” See Zarate, *Treasury’s War*, 338.

185 Author telephone interview with William Burns, June 15, 2017.

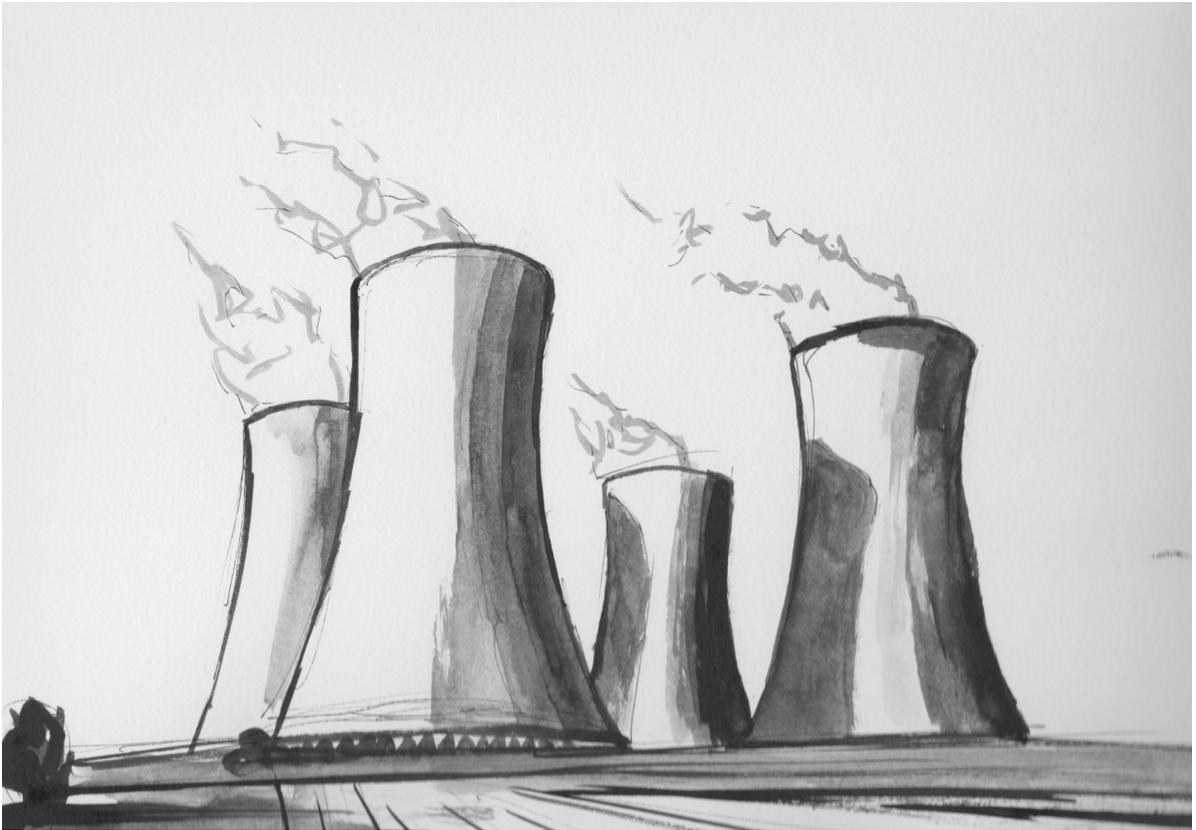
186 Author interview with Daniel B. Shapiro, Tel Aviv, Jan. 10, 2018.

187 Sanger, “Confronting Iran.”

188 Author telephone interview with William Burns, June 15, 2017.

189 Author interview with Daniel B. Shapiro, Tel Aviv, Jan. 10, 2018.

190 Author interview with Gary Samore, Cambridge, Mass., March 21, 2016.



Obama Toughens Rhetoric, but Stops Short of Red Line for Iran

Israel's campaign succeeded, albeit to a lesser degree than it had hoped, in wresting a public commitment to resort to military force against Iran from the U.S. president. Most notably, in March 2012, Obama told Jeffrey Goldberg of the *Atlantic* that both Iran and Israel should take seriously the possibility of U.S. action against Iran's nuclear facilities, stressing that "as president of the United States, I don't bluff." Obama added, "When the United States says it is unacceptable for Iran to have a nuclear weapon, we mean what we say."¹⁹¹ Addressing AIPAC two days later, Obama said, "I have said that when it comes to preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, I will take no options off the table, and I mean what I say." That, he said, "includes all elements of American power," including "a military effort to be prepared

for any contingency."¹⁹² This was the first time the United States publicly drew a distinction between prevention and containment of a nuclear Iran.¹⁹³ These two statements, directed more to Israel than to Iran, would remain Obama's most explicit reference to the military option. Both statements were later described by Panetta as "carefully crafted" gestures to the Israelis, designed to "reinforce their confidence that we would not abandon them."¹⁹⁴

While Barak was convinced that the United States possessed a credible and realistic military option to destroy Iran's nuclear program, he remained unconvinced by Obama's political reassurances. For instance, after Obama said that "as president of the United States, I don't bluff," the Israeli defense minister privately wondered whether Obama's statement was itself a bluff.¹⁹⁵ As Barak himself told this author, he remained "highly skeptical" about the U.S. commitment to ever pursue the military

191 Jeffrey Goldberg, "Obama to Iran and Israel: 'As President of the United States, I Don't Bluff,'" *Atlantic*, March 2, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/obama-to-iran-and-israel-as-president-of-the-united-states-i-dont-bluff/253875/>.

192 "Remarks by the President at AIPAC Policy Conference," White House Office of the Press Secretary, March 4, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/04/remarks-president-aipac-policy-conference-0>.

193 Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, 369.

194 Panetta, *Worthy Fights*, 405–7.

195 Goldberg, "Obama Doctrine."

option against Iran.¹⁹⁶ Barak later explained, “Though the president intermittently declared that ‘all options’ remained on the table, I knew from senior administration members that it was extremely unlikely to happen.”¹⁹⁷

In September 2012, the clash between Israel’s desire for a clear U.S. commitment and Obama’s determination to secure his latitude entered a new stage, with Netanyahu openly urging the president to publicly draw a “red line” for Iran that, if violated, would be met with “consequences.” The administration rejected the demand on the grounds that “we need some ability for the president to have decision-making room,”¹⁹⁸ which was precisely what Netanyahu wanted Obama to have less of. The exchange took a fiercer turn when Panetta implicitly accused Israel of attempting to coerce the United States. “Red lines,” he asserted, “are used to try to put people in a corner.”¹⁹⁹ To this, Netanyahu responded, “I know that people value flexibility. ... but I think that at this late stage of the game, Iran needs to see clarity.”²⁰⁰ Israel’s efforts were designed to limit Obama’s freedom of action and pin him down to an explicit use-of-force commitment.

Given this, Obama administration officials viewed Israel’s campaign as intended to motivate, if not push, the United States itself to launch an attack. According to Burns, “There was certainly concern in Washington that the object of this Israeli effort was not so much to get a green light to launch a unilateral Israeli strike as it was to box Obama into launching a U.S. military strike, with the kind of second-best option being an even more intense effort to build sanctions.”²⁰¹

Israel’s pressure campaign had yet another important effect on the United States, which is

that Washington, in an attempt to reassure Israel, accelerated its efforts to enhance the credibility of its own military option. In January 2012, U.S. officials said the Pentagon was ramping up its efforts to improve the Massive Ordnance Penetrator, a weapon specifically designed to penetrate Iranian and North Korean fortifications.²⁰² In August, an Israeli daily newspaper disclosed in its lead story details of the U.S. military plan for an attack on Iran, as discussed in Panetta’s visit to Israel just days before. The report maintained that the United States would potentially launch its attack “in a year and a half.”²⁰³ Shedding further light on Washington’s reassurance efforts, Panetta later remarked,

We in the United States were developing a weapon that could in fact be able to penetrate and do serious damage to their [Iran’s] capability, and it was in the effort to kind of show him [Barak] what we had developed and its capability that, I think, he recognized that we indeed did have a weapon that could, in fact, do some real damage to their enrichment capability.²⁰⁴

Lending credence to Panetta’s account, Barak recalled that, during the first two years in which Israel prepared its military option, the United States “was no more ready” than Israel. The existing U.S. military plan, Barak wrote, was “so obviously prone to lead to a wider conflict, that it would never have received the go-ahead from President Obama, or probably any president.” By 2012, however, “that had changed. ... [A]n intensive research-and-development effort and enormously improved planning and testing had yielded results.

196 Author interview with Ehud Barak, Cambridge, Mass., Sept. 8, 2016. See also Barak, *My Country, My Life*, 432–33.

197 Barak, *My Country, My Life*, 429.

198 Mark Landler and Helene Cooper, “Obama Rebuffs Netanyahu on Setting Limits on Iran’s Nuclear Program,” *New York Times*, Sept. 13, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/14/world/middleeast/obama-rebuffs-netanyahu-on-nuclear-red-line-for-iran.html>.

199 Lois Farrow Parshley, “A Whole New Era,” *Foreign Policy*, Sept. 17, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/17/a-whole-new-era/>.

200 “Netanyahu Urges U.S. to Set ‘Red Line’ for Iran,” *CNN Security Clearance Blog*, Sept. 16, 2012, <http://security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/09/16/netanyahu-urges-u-s-to-set-red-line-for-iran/>.

201 Telephone interview with William Burns, June 15, 2017. This may have been the case. In August 2012, *Haaretz* published an extensive interview with a “senior decision-maker” whom it indirectly identified as Barak. Linking the probability of a U.S. attack to a perceived, credible Israeli military option, the senior decision-maker — that is, Barak — added, “If Israel gives up and it becomes clear that it can no longer act, the likelihood of an American operation will decrease.” See Ari Shavit, “The Decision-Maker Is Warning: U.S. Cannot Be Trusted to Attack Iran on Time,” *Haaretz*, Aug. 10, 2012.

202 Adam Entous and Julian E. Barnes, “Pentagon Seeks Mightier Bomb vs. Iran,” *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 28, 2012, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203363504577187420287098692>.

203 Shimon Shiffer, “The Plan of Attack,” *Yediot Aharonot*, Aug. 3, 2012.

204 Author telephone interview with Leon Panetta, Aug. 12, 2016.



The Americans now had high-precision heavy munitions we couldn't dream of."²⁰⁵

Conclusion

In late 2011, Israel deliberately led the United States to infer that a unilateral Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear program could be imminent

Israel pursued its goal in an effort that, at times, met the definition of coercion.

— a scenario that deeply alarmed the Obama administration. The stakes involved one of the core issues animating asymmetric-alliance politics: the possibility that a junior ally — Israel — might present its senior strategic ally — the United States — with a *fait accompli* and entrap it in a military confrontation. With two military commitments already underway and a presidential election on the horizon, the United States strongly opposed an Israeli attack, which it deemed unnecessary, and had little interest in a confrontation with Iran. More importantly, Iran did not pose the same threat to the militarily superior United States as it did to Israel. It was for these reasons that a fierce intra-alliance bargaining episode occurred.

As noted in the outset of this article, asymmetric alliances represent a trade-off: The weaker ally trades its autonomy for security. In essence, Israel attempted to retain its autonomy in a way that the United States deemed extremely detrimental to its own interests. Ultimately, neither Israel nor the United States attacked Iran. This implies that, at the most overarching level, the stronger ally prevailed. How can this outcome be understood? And what are its implications for international and alliance politics?

Any attempt to discuss these questions must begin with the fact that, in the year under discussion, Israel purposefully created the perception of a potentially imminent military attack. This granted Israel more leverage than it otherwise would

have wielded over the United States. Israel then harnessed this leverage in a calculated effort to force its senior ally to more closely align with Israeli constraints and interests. This meant influencing Washington into adopting measures it otherwise would not have — steps that nudged the United States closer to a confrontation with Iran. These measures included the economic isolation of Iran, a credible presidential commitment to prevent Iran's nuclearization, and the development of a more effective and "realistic" U.S. military option.

Israel employed this strategy as a form of extended coercion — that is, in an attempt to manipulate Iran's strategic calculus via a powerful third party with considerable leverage over Tehran. Put differently, although the direct target of Israel's campaign was its primary ally, its ultimate target was Iran, which Israel sought to prevent from further developing its nuclear program. At a minimum, Israel strived to keep Iran's nuclear capabilities sufficiently vulnerable to its own military option, meaning that Israel would not have to rely on the United States for the removal of a potentially existential threat and that it would retain its autonomy despite its alliance with the United States. It may also be the case that Israel sought to influence the United States into tacit compliance with an Israeli attack or even to persuade it to unleash its own military option against Iran. It is also possible that Israel never genuinely intended to execute a unilateral attack against Iran.

Israel pursued its goal in an effort that, at times, met the definition of coercion. Having instilled a sense of urgency in its major ally, Israel implicitly threatened the United States with a *fait accompli*, doing little to allay obvious U.S. fears of entrapment. And still, at the most overarching level, the fact that Israel's perceived threat never materialized implies that the senior ally in this relationship got its way and that superior U.S. bargaining power overwhelmed Israeli decision-making. The United States proved capable of avoiding entrapment, of resisting its ally's demand for an explicit commitment to attack Iran, and of restraining its ally. This outcome is perhaps not surprising given that the United States was, by far, the more powerful actor in the relationship. This structural reality becomes all the more pronounced given that, whereas Israel had reached the pinnacle of its bargaining power and

205 Barak, *My Country, My Life*, 433.

exerted extraordinary pressure on its senior ally, Obama appeared to be in a particularly vulnerable situation. Especially because it was an election year, Obama sought to avoid a brutal clash with a close ally wielding considerable political influence. The balance of interests seemed to favor Israel, whose prime minister had consistently depicted Iran as an existential threat. Furthermore, the United States did not come close to exploiting the full range of dissuasion tactics at its disposal. Although Israel implicitly threatened its senior ally with entrapment, Washington neither reciprocated with a threat of abandonment nor threatened Israel with a “reassessment” of relations — steps that the administration may have dismissed as politically prohibitive. Ultimately, the United States prevailed in this atypically intense episode. The broader implications for coercive bargaining in an asymmetric relationship are that, even at the height of its bargaining power, a weaker ally will find it extremely difficult to entrap a superior ally or otherwise cause it to move in a direction it deems incompatible with its national security interests.

This basic reality does not preclude the weaker ally from wielding surprising leverage or from exploiting its ally's fear of entrapment for coercive purposes — something Israel appears to have done in this case. Indeed, to reassure Israel and forestall an attack, the Obama administration took measures it otherwise probably would not have, namely meeting Israel's demand for unprecedented economic sanctions on Iran and tougher rhetoric from the U.S. president. In the final analysis, however, the United States proved capable of restraining its particularly influential ally. This conclusion squares with the findings of scholars such as Jeremy Pressman, Michael Beckley, and Tongfi Kim, cited in the outset of this article. One can, perhaps, draw even wider conclusions about patterns of power and influence in international politics. Scholars have suggested the current era is characterized by accelerated “power diffusion,” which ultimately favors the weak.²⁰⁶ The outcome of this case study suggests that, even when the weak punch above their weight, the basic balance of power persists. In other words, the weak may be getting stronger, but the strong still get their way.

This case study also lends itself to a more

nuanced appreciation of the second-order effects that occur when an actor introduces a credible threat to use military force. For instance, while genuinely worried by Israel's perceived threat, the United States, according to several Obama administration officials, harnessed Israel's threat to persuade major actors like China to join the sanctions effort as an alternative to what appeared to be a credible scenario — a unilateral Israeli strike. This speaks to the way weak actors might be capable of amplifying their influence by impacting third parties — in this case the United States — and motivating them to use their leverage with other actors. By establishing the perception of a credible threat, Israel, in a sense, provided the United States not only with motivation but also with leverage it previously lacked, which the United States then used vis-à-vis other countries, like China.

Attempting to achieve desirable outcomes in foreign affairs can, of course, have unintended consequences. While Israel's pressure campaign produced several achievements — namely the economic isolation of Iran — it also helped to create the conditions for direct talks between its strategic ally and its archenemy. If Israel had hoped to influence Washington toward a more belligerent posture regarding Tehran, the opposite occurred, as the diplomatic channel culminated in a nuclear deal that Netanyahu denounced as a “historic mistake.”²⁰⁷ Former Mossad director Meir Dagan claimed to be speaking from personal knowledge when he asserted that by “signaling to the entire world” that Israel was preparing to attack Iran, Netanyahu motivated the United States to “search for an alternative in the form of an agreement.”²⁰⁸ Echoing Dagan's assertion is this point from Burns, who, along with Jake Sullivan, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's top policy adviser (and later national security adviser for Vice President Joe Biden), initiated the secret talks between the United States and Iran in the wake of Israel's pressure campaign:

The increased decibel level of the potential Israeli preparations for a strike accelerated the interest of the administration in pushing this diplomatic track simply because it certainly seemed as if we were getting closer and closer to the point of a real military

206 See Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008); Joseph S. Nye Jr., *The Future of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011); Moises Naím, *The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States, Why Being in Charge Isn't What It Used to Be* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

207 Isabel Kershner, “Iran Deal Denounced by Netanyahu as ‘Historic Mistake,’” *New York Times*, July 14, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/15/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-deal-israel.html>.

208 “Uvda with Ilana Dayan,” Channel 2, May 6, 2016.



conflict and that added a sense of urgency to this.²⁰⁹

And as Panetta noted,

There is no question that there's nothing like a military attack to get your attention. So, I'm sure that it heightened activity both in terms of what we were trying to do militarily as well as what the administration was looking at diplomatically. ... There was this effort to push on these other buttons to see if there might be a diplomatic solution to that threat.²¹⁰

This article sheds important light on a key topic for the theory and practice of international relations, namely the question of credibility. In their statements, Barak and Netanyahu stopped short of explicit threats to attack Iran. When he was asked, at the height of Israel's campaign, whether Jerusalem intended to attack Iran, Barak responded, "I think it should remain behind closed doors as part of a vague understanding that there is a big stick in the background."²¹¹ And, as he tellingly pointed out toward the end of the campaign, "The prime minister and myself have never come out and announced what it is we are interested in."²¹² Nonetheless, their various statements — and Israel's calibrated signals and military moves — created a context that appeared less like a "vague understanding" and more like an alarmingly credible military threat. This was made possible by two elements, the first of which corresponds with Thomas Schelling's assertion that, to appear credible, actors must "make it true." Barak himself would retrospectively attribute the belief that Israel was serious to "the fact that it was all real, which doesn't necessarily mean that we would have done it."²¹³ The second, and less explored, element pertains to secrecy. If Israel's campaign contained an element of deception, the strict secrecy and message discipline made it impossible to prove. Nowhere was this more evident than in the words of Pardo, the Mossad director, who noted that if Israel's pressure campaign was a bluff, at most two people knew it. Asked about the painstaking efforts exerted by the United States to unveil

Israel's genuine intentions, Barak confided, "It is not as if there was some secret chamber that if only you could penetrate you would discover everything was a bluff. And if nobody can tell you it is a bluff, you have to assume it is real."²¹⁴ While the potential costs and implications of a unilateral Israeli attack on Iran seemed too immense to be credible, Israel's preparations for such a strike seemed too real and costly to be dismissed as mere deception. The combination of Israel's genuine military moves and strict message discipline made the incredible look credible, and the unbelievable, believable.

As things stand, and in sharp contrast to the period discussed in this article, Israel and the administration of President Donald Trump appear to be tightly coordinated with respect to the Iranian nuclear issue. It is inescapable, however, that the challenge Iran poses to Israel is considerably graver than any threat it may pose to the militarily powerful and geographically distant United States. With the United States no longer part of the Iran nuclear deal, and in the absence of a new agreement, this challenge may present itself sooner than expected. Further down the line, this divergence of interests between Israel and the United States might yet again produce a political clash similar to the one explored in this article. 

Acknowledgements: For helpful comments and advice, the author wishes to thank Graham Allison, Oren Barak, Shai Feldman, Charles Freilich, Kelly Greenhill, Robert Jervis, Arie Kacowicz, Morgan Kaplan, Sean Lynn-Jones, Martin Malin, Steven Miller, Karen Motley, Michael Poznansky, Galia Press-Barnathan, Henry Rome, Amit Sheniak, Susan Rosenberg, Stephen Walt, Alec Worsnop, three anonymous reviewers, and participants in the 2016–2017 International Security Program seminar at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. The author gratefully acknowledges support from the Israel Institute during his appointment as a postdoctoral research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School.

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209 Author telephone interview with William Burns, June 15, 2017.

210 Author telephone interview with Leon Panetta, Aug. 12, 2016.

211 "Amanpour," With Christiane Amanpour, CNN, April 19, 2012.

212 "Hakol Diburim," With Ayala Hasson, *Voice of Israel*, Aug. 9, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4RAuOR8IHU>.

213 Author telephone interview with Ehud Barak, April 26, 2016.

214 Author interview with Ehud Barak, New York, May 31, 2016.