

# Triggers for War? Obama considers new “Red Lines” against Iran

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Under the guise of heading off an attack by Israel, the Obama administration is considering a number of aggressive measures that would only make a war against Iran more likely. According to a *New York Times* report on Sunday, citing unnamed US officials, the White House “is moving ahead with a range of steps short of war” in a bid to forestall Israeli strikes on Iran’s nuclear facilities and force Tehran back to the negotiating table.

“Already planned are naval exercises and new antimissile systems in the Persian Gulf, and a more forceful clamping down on Iranian oil revenue. The administration is also considering new declarations by President Obama about what might bring about American military action, as well as covert activities that have been previously considered and rejected,” the article reported.

The *Times* article ominously pointed to a discussion underway in the White House “about whether Mr Obama needs to reshape his negotiating strategy around clear ‘red lines’ for Iran—steps beyond which the United States would not allow the country to go.” The laying down of precise “red lines”—that is, the triggers for war—would only bring the prospect of an unprovoked and illegal US attack on Iran one step closer.

On Sunday, in comments designed to pressure Obama, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu criticised the “international community” for not “setting Iran a clear red line.” He told his cabinet: “Until Iran sees a clear red line and such determination, it will not stop the progress of its nuclear project—and Iran must not be allowed to have nuclear weapons.”

Netanyahu’s remarks are just the latest in a series of calls by Israeli officials for tougher action against Iran, as well as barely disguised threats of military action. Iran was undoubtedly top of the agenda at yesterday’s annual briefing of the Israeli security cabinet by the chiefs of the country’s intelligence agencies.

The Iranian regime has repeatedly denied unsubstantiated claims that it has plans to build a nuclear weapon. Moreover, as the *Times* article noted, American intelligence officials have said they have no evidence that Iran’s top leaders have decided to manufacture a nuclear device. According to the *Ha’aretz* newspaper, Israel’s Military Intelligence also “believes Iranian supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, has not made the decision to try to assemble a nuclear warhead.”

Netanyahu’s comments about the Iranian nuclear threat are entirely hypocritical. Unlike

Iran, which has signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and allows International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections, Israel is not an NPT signatory and has a substantial arsenal of nuclear weapons.

The US and international media seized on the latest IAEA report, released last week, to publish alarmist articles designed to inflate Iran's nuclear capacities. As an article by US analyst Gareth Porter pointed out, Iran's stockpile of uranium enriched to the 20 percent level had actually diminished because it had been manufactured into fuel plates for a research reactor in Tehran used to produce medical isotopes—precisely the material's declared purpose. Furthermore, 20 percent-enriched uranium is still far short of the 90 percent level required for weapons.

The US has been insisting that Iran end its production of 20 percent-enriched uranium, ship its stockpile of the material out of the country and shut its Fordow underground enrichment plant. Washington's refusal to offer Tehran any substantial concession in return—in particular, a suspension of punitive sanctions—led to the breakdown of negotiations between the P5+1 grouping (the US, Britain, France, China, Russia and Germany) and Iran in June.

Netanyahu, who has been dismissive of the international negotiations, has been pressing for a halt to all uranium enrichment—a demand that Tehran has always rejected, insisting on its right under the NPT to carry out peaceful nuclear activities. The Israeli government has never publicly announced its “red line” for military strikes on Iran, but has strongly hinted that it would act if Iran's Fordow plant became fully functional.

The Obama administration does not appear, at this stage, to have given Israel the green light to launch strikes against Iran. Comments by US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Martin Dempsey to Britain's *Guardian* indicate that the US is distancing itself from a unilateral Israeli attack. “I don't want to be complicit if they choose to do it,” he said.

The *Times* article does not suggest what “red lines” Obama might be considering, beyond his oft-stated threat that “all options are on the table” if Iran took steps toward building a nuclear warhead. In response to Netanyahu's comments, White House press secretary Jay Carney played down differences between Israel and the US, repeated Washington's call for a diplomatic solution, but warned that the “window [for talks] will not remain open indefinitely.”

At the same time, the Obama administration is seeking to toughen already harsh sanctions against Iran, designed to severely reduce its crucial oil exports, as well as continuing the US military build-up in the Persian Gulf. Later this month, the US and more than 25 other nations will hold the largest-ever minesweeping exercise in the Persian Gulf. While the Pentagon claims that the operation is defensive, its purpose is to blunt Iran's ability to retaliate in the event of an American attack.

Similarly, the US and Israel are preparing to hold a major joint exercise in late October designed to test Israeli antimissile systems. By reinforcing Israel's ability to neutralise retaliatory missiles from Iran, the US is making war more, rather than less, likely. The *Times* reports that the US is also “racing to complete, in the next several months, a new radar system in Qatar” that, together with comparable installations in Israel and Turkey, greatly enhances the ability of the US to detect, track and shoot down ballistic missiles.

The *Times* article also reported that the Obama administration is considering stepping up covert operations inside Iran. The newspaper referred directly to a US cyber operation that introduced the Stuxnet virus into Iran's uranium enrichment facility and caused its gas centrifuges to spin out of control. However, this is not the only covert operation: a number of Iranian nuclear scientists have been assassinated, most likely by Israel's Mossad intelligence agency with direct or indirect US support.

All the measures against Iran under consideration in the White House are highly provocative and could trigger conflict. The very fact that they are being aired publicly is testimony to the reckless and militarist character of US foreign policy. Washington's ratchetting up of tensions with Tehran is not primarily motivated by concerns over Iran's nuclear weapons, but is part of a broader strategy of establishing unchallenged American domination in the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

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