

„Those who have the privilege to know, have the duty to act.” — Albert Einstein

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III. MIDDLE EAST - ISRAEL



Netanyahu at a Crossroads

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“We are confident we can handle any threat on our own.” This sentence was part of a brief statement by Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, after a meeting with the Ministerial Committee for National Security Affairs to assess the large-scale drill conducted by the IDF, which began in late May and it lasted for about ten days.

These drills are the largest for the Israeli Defence Forces in years. They simulate a multi-front war that has political and military implications at a time, in my opinion, that is the tensest experienced by the political and military leadership in Israel, in light of differences that began to appear publicly with the main ally of Israel in Washington on the one hand, and of the rapid developments of the Iranian nuclear program on the other.

On the 31st of May, an Israeli delegation arrived in Washington. The delegation consisted of the Israeli National Security Adviser, Tzachi Hanegbi, the Israeli Minister of Strategic Affairs, Ron Dermer, in addition to the head of the Israeli Security Agency (Shin Bet), Ronen Bar. The delegation met with a number of American officials, headed by the Director of the CIA, William Burns and Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, Jake Sullivan.

These meetings came after leaks about a preliminary agreement reached between Washington and Tehran with Omani and Qatari mediation on the Iranian nuclear program, the agreement is based on the quid-pro-quo principle, where Tehran reduces its uranium enrichment to less than 60% in exchange for Washington releasing part of the frozen funds for Tehran. This agreement, if implemented, may be the beginning of a return to larger negotiations to formulate a new, more comprehensive agreement. This news, in my opinion, was the reason for the visit of the Israeli security delegation to Washington.

There is no clear information about what was discussed during this visit, but we, as observers, can put forward a close perception of what was discussed in closed rooms in Washington between Israeli and American officials. It is clear that the participation of the Shabak chief confirms that the delegation has intelligence related to Iran's nuclear program that was discussed, as well as that parts of the nuclear military installations began to be transferred to fortified sites at a depth of 60 and 80 meters underground, which makes their destruction impossible or at the very least complicated, in addition to information about the amount of highly enriched uranium recently collected by Tehran.



Source: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2331141/middle-east>

The sharing of this information by the Israeli side with the Americans came in parallel with Netanyahu's rejection of any temporary agreement. This direct message from Israel was met with tension and annoyance on the American side, that translated into the cancellation of Blinken's visit to Israel scheduled for the 9th of May. This is what prompted Netanyahu to say in his statement mentioned at the beginning of this article that Israel is able to move on its own.

But can Israel move against Iran's nuclear program on its own, and what are the alternative options?

At the outset, it must be emphasised that the time factor is very important in the event that leaks are confirmed about the transfer of Iranian nuclear facilities underground. This reality puts Netanyahu in front of weeks or months at most before Iran's nuclear program becomes completely protected from any external targeting. Therefore, the solutions on the table are shrinking between a limited strike that will delay Iran's nuclear program for months or a year at the latest, or a comprehensive strike on the program or the diplomatic option through confidence in Washington's vision and the decisions of its officials.

As for the diplomatic option, it is clear that Israeli officials do not trust Tehran's intentions on the one hand, just as they no longer trust that Washington really does not want Tehran to become a nuclear state. Indeed, a large part of Israeli officials have become convinced that a nuclear Iran is not a threat to Washington and its international influence. Consequently, this perception diminishes more and more trust between Israeli and American officials.

Recently, there are indications of de-escalation between Tehran and Washington, and one of its features is the visit of officials of the International Atomic Energy Agency to Tehran, which was followed by Iraq's release in favour of Iran of 3 billion dollars that were frozen. Despite the official American denial that they reached any agreement, these indicators are certainly part of a larger scheme.

As for militarily, yes, the Israel Defence Forces has the military and logistical capacity to strike Iran's nuclear program and destroy it completely, but the biggest danger is after this strike and the reaction of Iran and its militias in the region. If this is the case, Israel becomes in need of American cover in front of thousands of missiles and drones that will launch from Lebanon, Gaza, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, in addition to Iran.

Among the lectures that are taught to IDF officers, there is a section related to the psychological state of the officer before and after making important decisions, where the officer may have to make a dangerous and insane one, but it is important for him to be calm to deal with the utmost ingenuity with the results of his decision.

Netanyahu, a former army officer himself, knows very well that he is at a crossroads that may be the most important for Israel since the Camp David agreement with Egypt. Either he will accept Iran, which has excess power through which it will redefine the power equation in the Middle East in general, or he will choose the decision to go to war on his own.