

Leaked Report: “CIA Does Not Know” If Israel Plans to Bomb Iran

A leaked intelligence report from February says “Netanyahu probably calculates Israel will need to strike Iran to deter its nuclear program.”

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Whether Israel’s escalating threats of war with Iran over its nuclear program are saber-rattling or something more serious is a mystery even to the CIA, according to a portion of a top-secret intelligence report leaked on the platform Discord earlier this year. The uncertainty about the intentions of one of the U.S.’s closest allies calls into question the basis of the “ironclad” support for Israel publicly espoused by the Biden administration.

The report — which was [first covered](#) by the Israeli channel i24 News and subsequently [posted by](#) DDoSecrets, a group that publishes leaked documents — reveals an undisclosed military exercise conducted by Israel. “On 20 February, Israel conducted a large-scale air exercise,” the intelligence report, produced by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence on February 23, states. The exercise, it says, was “probably to simulate a strike on Iran’s nuclear program and possibly to demonstrate Jerusalem’s resolve to act against Tehran.” There have been several joint U.S.-Israeli military exercises in recent months, including one [proudly billed](#) by the Pentagon as the largest “in history.”

“CIA does not know Israel’s near term plans and intentions,” the report adds, speculating that “Netanyahu probably calculates Israel will need to strike Iran to deter its nuclear program and faces a declining military capability to set back Iran’s enrichment program.”

That the U.S.’s premier intelligence service indicated it had no idea how seriously to take Israel’s increasingly bombastic threats to Tehran means that, in all likelihood, neither does the White House. But despite this lack of clarity, Biden has not opposed a unilateral Israeli attack on Iran — and his national security adviser recently hinted at blessing it.

“We have made clear to Iran that it can never be permitted to obtain a nuclear weapon,”

Jake Sullivan [said in](#) a speech earlier this month, reiterating the administration's oft-repeated line. The rhetoric reflects what military planners call "strategic ambiguity," a policy of intentional uncertainty in order to deter an adversary — in this case, around how far the U.S. might go to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. But Sullivan went a step further, adding, "As President Biden has repeatedly reaffirmed, he will take the actions that are necessary to stand by this statement, including by recognizing Israel's freedom of action."

Sullivan's statement represents the strongest signal yet that the administration would not oppose unilateral action by Israel. The rhetoric has also been echoed by other administration officials. In February, the U.S. ambassador to Israel, Tom Nides, [said that](#) "Israel can and should do whatever they need to deal with [Iran] and we've got their back."

"In the current context this constitutes glibness," said Paul Pillar, a retired national intelligence officer for the near east, of Sullivan's statement. Pillar is now a senior fellow at Georgetown's Center for Security Studies. "I believe the administration is playing with fire with this kind of rhetoric and with the joint military planning." Last week, [Axios reported](#) that the U.S. recently proposed cooperating with Israel on joint military planning around Iran but denied they would plan to strike Iran's nuclear program.

"Biden has dangerously shifted America's policy on Israeli military action against Iran," Trita Parsi, executive vice president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, told The Intercept. "Previous administrations made it crystal clear to Israel — including publicly — that an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear program would be destabilizing, would not prevent a nuclear Iran and would likely drag the US into a war it could do well without."

"Obama's clear opposition played a crucial role in the internal deliberations of the Israeli cabinet in 2010 and 2011 when Israel was on the verge of starting war," Parsi pointed out. In 2009, after then-Vice President Biden said "Israel can determine for itself ... what they decide to do relative to Iran," Obama [clarified that](#) his administration was "absolutely not" giving Israel a green light to attack Iran.

Israel's own military officials concede that an attack on Iran would likely metastasize into a broader regional war. Earlier this month, retired Israel Defense Forces Brig. Gen. Amir Avivi [reportedly said](#) that "Israel might have to deal with the Iranian nuclear program," adding that "this will mean an Israeli attack on Iran which will probably result in a regional war."

IN JANUARY, JUST weeks before Israel's secret exercise referenced in the intelligence report, the U.S. and Israel conducted what the Defense Department touted as their largest joint military exercise in history. Called Juniper Oak, the exercise involved "electronic attack, suppression of enemy air defenses, strike coordination and reconnaissance," which [experts said](#) "are exactly what the U.S. and Israel would need to conduct a successful kinetic attack on Iran's nuclear program."

The unprecedented exercise was made possible by a [little-noticed order](#) by President Donald Trump just days before Biden's inauguration. Using his authority as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, Trump ordered Israel be moved from European Command's area of responsibility, where it had been located since 1983 to avoid friction with its Middle East neighbors, to that of Central Command, the Pentagon's Middle East combatant command.

Under Biden, CENTCOM, whose area of responsibility includes Iran, has continued to

coordinate closely with Israel. In March, Biden's CENTCOM chief, Gen. Michael Kurilla, said in Senate testimony [that](#) the decision to move Israel from EUCOM to CENTCOM "immediately and profoundly altered the nature and texture of many of CENTCOM's partnerships," adding that "CENTCOM today readily partners with Arab militaries and the Israel Defense Force alike."

"In fact, the inclusion of Israel presents many collaborative and constructive security opportunities," Kurilla said. "Our partners of four decades largely see the same threats and have common cause with Israel Defense Forces and the Arab militaries in defending against Iran's most destabilizing activities."

Put simply, for the first time, the U.S. and both its Arab and Israeli allies are structurally aligned against a common foe: Iran.

At the same hearing, Sen. Tom Cotton, who [had advocated](#) for the relocation of Israel to CENTCOM weeks before Trump gave the order, raised the possibility of training Israeli pilots in the use of mid-air refuel aircraft. The lack of such aircraft, which allow fighter jets to travel long distances, is a key impediment to Israel's ability to reach Iranian nuclear facilities.

"One of the opportunities I see is having Israeli Air Force personnel training alongside American personnel on KC 46 tankers, which we expect to provide them in future," Cotton said. Kurilla, for his part, demurred, replying that training might be better "when they get closer to getting their aircraft ... so they can retain that training and go right into the execution of operating them."

THOUGH BIDEN CAMPAIGNED on reinstating the Iran nuclear deal — also called JCPOA, which Obama established and Trump pulled out of — the deal is all but dead.

"With Iran, any concerns about a nuclear program have sometimes been overwhelmed by a desire — based on partisanship in the U.S. and heavily influenced by the government of Israel — to isolate Iran and not do any business or negotiations with it at all," Pillar told The Intercept. "Hence you had Trump's reneging on the JCPOA agreement in 2018, with a direct result of that reneging being that there is now far more reason to be worried about a possible Iranian nuclear weapon than there was when the JCPOA was still in effect."

Should Iran acquire a nuclear weapon, it would likely trigger a dangerous regional arms race. Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has [made clear](#) that Riyadh would "follow suit as soon as possible" with its own atomic bomb should Tehran obtain one.

But one key fact is often left out of discussions about Iran and the bomb: There's no evidence that it's actually pursuing one.

As the Pentagon's most recent Nuclear Posture Review plainly states, "Iran does not today possess a nuclear weapon and we currently believe it is not pursuing one." More recently, CIA Director William Burns reiterated that point in an [interview with CBS](#) in February. "To the best of our knowledge," Burns said, "we don't believe that the Supreme Leader in Iran has yet made a decision to resume the weaponization program that we judge that they suspended or stopped at the end of 2003."

Iran's policy could, of course, change. And tensions are rising in large part because of the

U.S.'s recent posturing. For example, following the Juniper Oak exercise, Iran responded with its own military exercises, which Iranian military commander Maj. Gen. Gholam-Ali Rashid [said](#) they consider a "half war" and even a "war before war."

In April, CENTCOM announced the deployment of a submarine armed with guided missiles in the Mediterranean Sea. This was likely a message directed at Iran, which quickly [responded](#) by accusing the U.S. of "warmongering."

Earlier, in October, CENTCOM issued an extraordinary [press release](#) featuring Kurilla, the CENTCOM chief, aboard a submarine armed with ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads in the Arabian Sea — another message for Iran.

On May 9, Pentagon spokesperson Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder announced that the military would be increasing its patrols in the Strait of Hormuz, through which many Iranian vessels travel. In his remarks, Ryder made particular mention of the P-8 Poseidon aircraft and the role it would play in bolstering maritime surveillance of the area.

The same aircraft made international news in 2019, when Iran disclosed that it almost downed a P-8 carrying U.S. service members that it claimed had entered its airspace, opting instead to shoot down a nearby drone. The U.S. military [scrambled jets](#) to strike Iran in retaliation, only to be called off by Trump 10 minutes before the attack when a general told him that the strikes would probably kill 150 people. The strikes would not, Trump said, have been "proportionate to shooting down an unmanned drone."

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