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Inter Service Press

Little US Popular Support for Israeli Attack on Iran

Posted By Jim Lobe

March 13, 2012

Amid persistent speculation over a possible Israeli military attack against Iranian nuclear facilities in the wake of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Washington, a detailed new public opinion survey released Tuesday suggests that such a move would enjoy little support in the United States.

According to the [survey](#) by the University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), only one in four U.S. respondents favors an Israeli strike, while nearly seven in 10 (69%), including a strong majority of Republicans (59%), said they prefer continuing negotiations with Tehran.

Only one in seven (14%) of the survey's 727 respondents said they thought Washington should encourage an Israeli attack, while 80% said the U.S. should either discourage Israel from taking such a step (34%) or maintain a neutral position (46%).

And, consistent with their preference for diplomacy over military action, nearly three out of four respondents, including 69% of Republicans, said the U.S. should act primarily through the U.N. Security Council, rather than unilaterally, in dealing with Iran's nuclear program.

Meanwhile, a second public opinion poll released Tuesday by *The New York Times* and CBS News found a slight majority (51%) of 1,009 respondents who said they would support the U.S. taking military action in order to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

That poll, which did not offer an option for continued diplomacy or negotiations, found that 36% of respondents would oppose such a strike. The remaining 13% said they were unsure.

Asked what the U.S. should do if Israel conducted its own unilateral strike, a 47% plurality said Washington should support the Jewish state, 42% said it should “not get involved,” and only 1% said the U.S. should oppose it.

The two surveys were released just days after last week’s annual policy conference of the powerful American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), whose 13,000 activist-attendees were addressed by Netanyahu and President Barack Obama, among other luminaries, before fanning out across Capitol Hill to lobby their elected representatives for a more-confrontational U.S. stance toward Iran and its nuclear program.

Top Israeli leaders, including Netanyahu during his visit to Washington, have been suggesting for several months they were prepared to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities some time this year unless Tehran agreed to abandon its nuclear program.

The Obama administration, on the other hand, has made clear, especially over the past three months, that unprecedented economic sanctions, combined with renewed negotiations with Iran by the so-called P5+1 (U.S., Britain, France, Russia, and China, plus Germany) should be given more time to reach a diplomatic settlement. Britain and France have also come out publicly during the past week against an Israeli strike.

It is not yet clear what was the impact, if any, of the AIPAC conference on popular attitudes.

On the one hand, the results in the *Times*/CBS poll — which was conducted over four days (March 7-11) immediately after the conference — about U.S. military action against Iran were essentially no different from those of polls conducted over the past three years that also asked respondents whether they would support or oppose a U.S. strike against Iran to prevent it from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

On the question of how the U.S. should react to an Israeli attack on Iran, on the other hand, the latest poll suggested an increase in support for Israel when compared to a Pew Research Center poll just one month ago in which 51% of respondents said Washington should “stay neutral” under such circumstances.

At the same time, 42% of respondents supported Obama’s “handling of the situation in Iran,” while 39% opposed. But the PIPA poll, which was conducted during the conference (March 3-7), probed far more deeply into attitudes about an Israeli strike against Iran and related issues, noted Peter Ferenbach, an expert on foreign policy attitudes and co-founder of ReThink Media, an organization works with nonprofit groups.

“It’s a welcome exploration of what Americans really think about Iran’s nuclear program, and, not surprisingly, people’s responses are more nuanced when the issue is explored in depth,” he told IPS, adding that the “policy debate has been ill-served by a long string of poorly designed polls on this critical issue.”

“The phrasing of the *Times*/CBS poll — ‘Do you favor using military action against Iran to prevent the country from acquiring nuclear weapons?’ — has a built-in efficacy bias that presumes a military strike would end Iran’s nuclear program, a view held by virtually no one at the Pentagon.”

Indeed, the PIPA poll found that most respondents were pessimistic about the effects of a military strike on Iran’s nuclear program. Only one in five (18%) said they believed that an Israeli military strike will delay Iran’s alleged ambition to acquire nuclear weapons by more than five years.

A 51% majority said they thought a strike would either delay Iran’s ability to produce a weapon by only one to two years (20%), or would have no effect (9%), or would actually result in Iran accelerating its nuclear program (22%).

Interestingly, those percentages were similar to the findings of a [survey of Israeli public opinion](#) on the same question conducted late last month by Shibley Telhami, a fellow at the Brookings Institution and the Sadat chair at the University of Maryland, which co-sponsored the PIPA poll.

In a widely noted interview on CBS’s popular *60 Minutes* public-affairs program Sunday, former Israeli Mossad chief Meir Dagan also noted that an Israeli strike could at best delay Iran’s program.

A 51% majority in the PIPA poll also said an Israeli attack would either strengthen the regime (30%) or would have no effect on its hold on power (21%), while 42% said the regime would be weakened.

Moreover, only one in five respondents said they believed armed conflict between Iran and Israel would last either days or weeks. Three of four respondents said they believed such a conflict would last months (26%) or years (48%).

“One of the reasons Americans are so cool toward the idea of Israel attacking Iran’s nuclear program is that most believe that it is not likely to produce much benefit,” said Steven Kull, PIPA’s director.

Nearly six in 10 respondents (58%) said they thought Iran has decided to build nuclear weapons and is actively working toward that aim, an assertion that is at odds with the consensus view of the U.S. intelligence community, which most recently concluded that, while Tehran “is developing some of the technical ability necessary to produce nuclear weapons, [it] has not decided whether to produce them.”

Thirty percent of respondents agreed with the latter position, while only 6% accepted Iran's repeated assertions that it is producing enriched uranium for civilian purposes only.

Asked to assume that Iran actually developed nuclear weapons, 62% of respondents said they believed the regime would likely use them to attack Israel, as opposed to only 32% who thought it would be deterred from doing so for fear of being destroyed in a nuclear retaliatory strike.