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## Hawks Divided: AfPak or Iran?

By [Jim Lobe](#)

May 10, 2009

A potentially major clash appears to be developing between powerful factions inside and outside the U.S. government, pitting those who see the Afghanistan/Pakistan ("AfPak") theater as the greatest potential threat to U.S. national security against those who believe that the danger posed by a nuclear Iran must be given priority.

The Iran hawks, concentrated within the Israeli government and its U.S. supporters in the so-called Israel lobby here, want to take aggressive action against Iran's nuclear program by moving quickly to a stepped-up sanctions regime.

Many suggest that Israel or the U.S. may ultimately have to use military force against Tehran if President Barack Obama's diplomatic efforts at engagement do not result at least in a verifiable freeze – if not a rollback - of the program by the end of the year.

Their opponents appear to be concentrated at the Pentagon, where top leaders are more concerned with providing a level of regional stability that will allow the U.S. to wind down its operations in Iraq, step up its counter-insurgency effort in Afghanistan, and, above all, ensure the security of the Pakistani state and its nuclear weapons.

In their view, any attack on Iran would almost certainly throw the entire region into even greater upheaval. Both Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have repeatedly and publicly warned over the past year against any moves that would further destabilize the region.

Other key administration players are believed to share this view, including senior military officers such as Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Adm. Dennis Blair and Gen. Douglas Lute, the "war czar" whose White House portfolio includes both Iraq and South Asia.

The divide between these factions was on vivid display this past week, when Washington played host to two high-profile – and dissonant – events.

First, top U.S. and Israeli leaders were out in force at the annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the powerful and hawkish lobby group, where attendees heard a steady drumbeat of dire warnings about the "existential threat" to Israel of an Iranian bomb and calls for increased sanctions – and occasionally even military force – against Tehran.

Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan were rarely mentioned at the conference, which instead stressed hopes for building a U.S.-led coalition against Tehran that would include both Israel and "moderate" Sunni-led Arab states.

But just as more than 6,000 AIPAC delegates fanned out Wednesday across Capitol Hill to press their lawmakers to sign on to tough anti-Iran sanctions legislation, the arrival of Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari for summit talks with Obama and other top officials focused attention on the deteriorating situation in both countries.

The surface cordiality of Karzai's and Zardari's visits masked the fact that the U.S. has grown increasingly worried about the ability of either leader to combat their respective Taliban insurgencies.

Most indications are that the Obama administration, including Obama himself and Vice President Joe Biden, sides with the Pentagon, at least for now.

But the AIPAC conference, which was attended by more than half of the members of the U.S. Congress and featured speeches by the top congressional leadership of both parties, served as a reminder that Iran hawks within the Israel lobby have a strong foothold in the legislative branch and may be able to push Iran to the top of the foreign-policy agenda whether the administration likes it or not.

Obama pledged during the presidential campaign that he would give AfPak – which he then called the "central front in the war on terror" – top priority, and, since taking office, he has made good on that promise.

He appointed a powerful special envoy, Richard Holbrooke, with a broad mandate to take charge of U.S. diplomacy in the region. Holbrooke, who met briefly with a senior Iranian official during a conference at The Hague in late March, has said several times that Tehran has an important role to play in stabilizing Afghanistan.

At the same time, Mullen, the U.S. military chief, has been virtually "commuting" to and from the region to meet with his Pakistani counterpart, Gen. Ashfaq Kiyani, Holbrooke noted in congressional testimony this week.

Given its preoccupation with AfPak and with stabilizing the region as a whole, the Pentagon has naturally been disinclined to increase tensions with Iran, which shares lengthy borders with Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan and could easily make life significantly more difficult for the U.S. in each of the three countries.

But the new Israeli government under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is pushing the U.S. to confront Iran over its nuclear program, and his allies in the U.S. have similarly argued that Iran should be a top priority.

For the moment, the Iran hawks have mostly expressed muted – if highly skeptical – support for Obama’s diplomatic outreach to Tehran. But they have warned that this outreach must have a "short and hard end date," as Republican Sen. Jon Kyl put it at the AIPAC conference, at which point the U.S. must turn to harsher measures.

AIPAC’s current top legislative priority is a bill, co-sponsored by Kyl and key Democrats, that would require Obama to impose sanctions on foreign firms that export refined petroleum products to Iran.

In recent congressional testimony, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the administration would support such "crippling" sanctions against Tehran if diplomacy did not work, but she declined to say how long the administration would permit diplomatic efforts to play out before taking stronger action.

While sanctions seem to be the topic du jour, the possibility of military action against Tehran remains on everybody’s mind, as does the question of whether Israel would be willing to strike Iranian nuclear facilities without Washington’s approval.

In March, Netanyahu told *The Atlantic* that "if we have to act, we will act, even if America won’t."

Asked at the AIPAC conference whether Israel would attack Iran without a "green light" from the U.S., former Israeli deputy defense minister Ephraim Sneh joked that in Israel, stoplight signals are "just a recommendation."

By contrast, Pentagon officials have made little secret of their opposition. In late April, Gates told the Senate Appropriations committee that a military strike would only delay Iran’s acquisition of a nuclear capability while "send[ing] the program deeper and more covert."

Last month, Mullen told the *Wall Street Journal* that an Israeli attack would pose "exceptionally high risks" to U.S. interests in the region. (Although the newspaper chose not to publish this part of the interview, Mullen’s office provided a record to IPS.)

Similarly, Biden told CNN in April that an Israeli military strike against Tehran would be "ill-advised." And former national security adviser (NSA) Brent Scowcroft, who is close to both Gates and the current NSA, ret. Gen. James Jones, told a conference here late last month that such an attack would be a "disaster for everybody."

For the moment, the top Pentagon leadership’s resistance to an attack on Iran appears to be playing a major role in shaping the debate in Washington.

Gates "is a bulwark against those who want to go to war in Iran or give the green light for Israel to go to war," said former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski last month.

Others dispute the idea, proposed by Netanyahu in his speech to AIPAC, that the Iranian threat can unite Israel and the Arab states.

"The Israeli notion making the rounds these days that Arab fears of Iran might be the foundation for an alignment of interest is almost certainly wrong," wrote Marc Lynch, a professor at George Washington University, on the *Foreign Policy* Web site.

"Nothing would unite Arab opinion faster than an Israeli attack on Iran. The only thing which might change that would be serious movement toward a two state solution [in Israel-Palestine]."