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Israel and Iran

The gathering storm

Jan 7th 2010 | JERUSALEM AND TEL AVIV
From *The Economist* print edition

As Israel pushes for sanctions against Iran, it also mulls options for war

Israeli Air Force Correction to this article



Raiders of Osiraq

SHORTLY after four in the afternoon on June 7th 1981, the late King Hussein of Jordan looked up from his yacht off the port of Aqaba and saw eight Israeli F-16 jets, laden with weapons and external fuel tanks, streaking eastward. He called his military staff, but could not find out what was going on. An hour or so later, the answer became clear. After a ground-hugging infiltration through Saudi Arabia, the jets climbed up near Baghdad and bombed Saddam Hussein's Osiraq nuclear reactor.

Zeev Raz, the squadron's leader (pictured bottom right), still recalls every phase of "Operation Opera": his constant worries about running out of fuel; the risky move to jettison tanks, while the bombs were still attached to the wings, to reduce drag; and the loss of a key navigational marker. He overshot his target and had to loop back. He later discovered that his deputy, Amos Yadlin (now Israel's military-intelligence chief), had slipped ahead and, annoyingly, dropped the first bombs. Somehow the Iraqis were surprised. King Hussein's tip had not been passed on. And even though Iraq was then at war with Iran, there were no air patrols or active surface-to-air missile batteries. The Israelis encountered only brief anti-aircraft fire. In the cockpit video of the last and most exposed plane, Ilan Ramon (top left), who later died in the *Columbia* shuttle disaster in 2003, is heard grunting nervously. Their mission completed, the jets flew home brazenly on the direct route over Jordan.

The Osiraq raid, condemned at the time, is often seen these days as the model for "preventive" military action against nuclear threats. It set back Iraq's nuclear programme and, after America's two wars against Iraq in 1991 and 2003, Saddam never built nuclear weapons. Such methods were repeated in September 2007, when Israeli jets destroyed a suspected nuclear reactor under construction in Syria. Now that Iran is moving inexorably closer to an atomic bomb, will the Israeli air force be sent to destroy its nuclear sites?

By Israel's reckoning, Iran will have the know-how to make nuclear weapons within months and, thereafter, could build atomic bombs within a year. Even if Iran does not seek to realise its dreams of wiping out the Jewish state, Israeli officials say a nuclear-armed Iran would lead to "cataclysmic" changes in the Middle East. America would be weakened and Iran become dominant; pro-Western regimes would become embattled, and radical armed groups such as Hizbullah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza would feel emboldened.

Saudi Arabia, Egypt and others could, in turn, seek their own nuclear arms. In a multi-nuclear Middle East, Israel's nuclear arms may not ensure a stabilising, cold-war-style deterrent. "If Iran gets nuclear weapons, the Middle East will look like hell," says one senior Israeli official. "I cannot imagine that we can live with a nuclear Iran." For Israel, 2010 is the year of decision. Yet its ability to destroy the nuclear sites is questionable, and such a strike may precipitate a regional war, or worse.

Mr Raz, for one, thinks Israel cannot repeat the Osiraq feat. Iran's nuclear sites are farther away; they are dispersed, and many are buried. The disclosure last year of a secret enrichment facility being dug into a mountain near Qom suggests that there are others undiscovered. "The Iranians are clever. They learnt well from Osiraq," says Mr Raz. "There is no single target that you can bomb with eight aircraft."

For Mr Raz, Israeli air power could, at most, set the Iranian nuclear programme back by a year or two—not enough to be worth the inevitable Iranian retaliation, which might include rockets fired at Israeli cities by Iran and its allies, Hizbullah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. A more thorough action would require ground troops in Iran, but nobody is contemplating that.

Though he now works for a defence-electronics contractor and lives comfortably in a flat with a commanding view over Israel's narrow coastal plain, Mr Raz exudes gloom. His four children, all adults, are applying for foreign passports—German ones, of all things. His eldest daughter, a mother of two, "does not think Israel is safe any more"—not just because of the prospect of a nuclear Iran, but because years of suicide-bombings and rockets have sapped belief in peace. Her siblings, he says, were persuaded to apply too.

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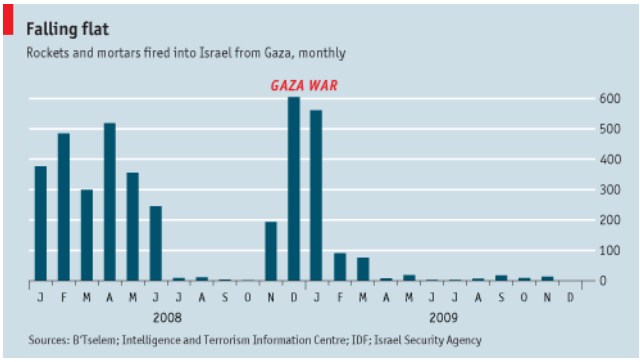

This is a surprising admission, particularly from a kibbutz-bred former fighter pilot. Most Israelis still believe in the mystique of their air force. And for much of the past year Israel has been unusually calm. Palestinian suicide-bombings are very rare, and the morale-sapping showers of rockets have all but stopped (see chart above).

In Israel's view this is thanks to the tough security measures it has taken, among them the contentious security barrier in the West Bank, and its willingness to go to war against Hizbullah in 2006 and against Hamas a year ago. "Deterrence is working wonderfully," says one defence official. But both militias are rearming, partly thanks to help from Iran, with missiles of even greater range that could reach the crowded Tel Aviv region from either Gaza or Lebanon. And the lull has been bought at a serious cost to Israel's diplomatic standing. An inquiry commissioned by the UN Human Rights Council and headed by a South African judge, Richard Goldstone, found that Israel (and to a lesser extent Hamas) may be guilty of war crimes in Gaza. Europe is regarded as increasingly hostile, a region where Israeli government and military officials travel warily to avoid war-crimes lawsuits.

There are doubts even about Israel's great ally, America, after a spat over Jewish settlements in the West Bank. President Barack Obama may be clever, Israelis say, but he lacks the empathy with Israel shown by his predecessors, Bill Clinton and George Bush. One minister, Limor Livnat, recently said that Israel had "fallen into the hands of a horrible American administration".

Israel thus finds itself in a paradoxical state: more secure for now, but acutely anxious about the future; closer than ever to some Arab regimes because of a perceived common threat from Iran and its radical allies, yet more demonised by its Western friends. Israelis see a global campaign of "delegitimisation" akin to efforts to isolate white-ruled South Africa. "I'm sure the Afrikaners felt like we feel now," says Mr Raz.



For many Israeli strategists, the decision over whether to bomb Iran is the most important in decades—some say since the birth of the Jewish state in 1948. The Israeli prime minister, Binyamin "Bibi" Netanyahu—the son of a staunchly nationalist professor of Jewish history, and the younger brother of Yonatan "Yoni" Netanyahu, who died leading the famed rescue of hostages from Entebbe in 1976—is said to feel the weight of history. His office is adorned with portraits of two of his political idols. One is Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism. But the other, Winston Churchill, is unusual in a country that regards Britain as having betrayed the Zionist cause when it ruled Palestine.

Bibi as Winston

Mr Netanyahu draws inspiration from the British wartime leader for reasons both tactical and strategic. Political courage in Israel is often deemed to mean willingness to surrender, after decades of colonisation, the territories captured in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war; to act like Charles de Gaulle, who gave up Algeria. By holding up Churchill, Mr Netanyahu is saying that courage consists of holding tenaciously to one's beliefs, regardless of popularity.

This model carried special force on the question of Iran. As opposition leader, Mr Netanyahu recalled Churchill's efforts to awaken the world to the danger of Nazi Germany. "It's 1938 and Iran is Germany," he said in 2006. Now that he is in power, pundits ask, might Bibi see himself as the Churchill of the Battle of Britain, fighting alone against Hitler and desperately trying to draw America into the war?

Iran is central to Mr Netanyahu's thinking. It helps explain his surprisingly strong partnership with Ehud Barak, the leader of the Labour Party (and a former army chief of staff and prime minister), trusted as the only man able to handle the big security issues. It helps that he served in Sayeret Matkal, the elite commando unit once led by Mr Barak—and by brother Yoni.

Iran affects Mr Netanyahu's calculations on the Palestinian issue too. He came to office convinced that tackling Iran was a bigger priority than peacemaking with Palestinians. This may have been a convenient argument for a sceptic of the "peace process". In truth, a peace deal has been difficult ever since the Palestinian movement split violently in 2007 between the Islamists of Hamas who seized Gaza, and the more secular Fatah faction that clings on to bits of the West Bank (with Israeli and American help) under President Mahmoud Abbas. Mr Netanyahu argued

that even if a deal were possible, a nuclear-armed Iran would unravel any agreements. But in the view of prominent Palestinians such as Ghassan Khatib, a former planning minister, peacefully resolving the nuclear stand-off would help push Hamas into more moderate positions.

Under pressure from Mr Obama, who argued that progress on the Palestinian issue would help galvanise an Arab coalition to confront Iran, Mr Netanyahu has since adjusted his positions. He belatedly accepted the idea of a Palestinian "state", albeit a demilitarised one. And having upset the Obama administration by rejecting its demand for a complete halt to settlement-building, he later announced a unilateral, partial, ten-month suspension.

Something is now stirring. During a recent trip to Cairo, Mr Netanyahu seems to have offered enough to win praise from Egypt and start a new flurry of diplomacy that may yet lead to new peace talks. Mr Netanyahu's aides now speak in Labour-like aphorisms: "We must make progress with Palestinians as if there is no Iran, and confront Iran as if there is no Palestinian issue," says one. Perhaps there is a bit of de Gaulle in Mr Netanyahu after all. Or perhaps, as one *Haaretz* columnist, Aluf Benn, noted, the parallel is that Churchill brought America into the war, but lost the empire.

Mr Netanyahu has gone along with the Obama administration's decision to talk directly to Iran. In contrast with the threats issued by the government of his predecessor, Ehud Olmert, his cabinet has been told to keep quiet about military planning, saying only: "All options are on the table". As one aide puts it: "Those who know will not speak; and those who speak do not know."

Clues in the wind

The few public signals seem contradictory. Mr Netanyahu has boosted the defence budget, and the army is planning to distribute gas masks to all citizens next month. Joint missile-defence exercises were held with America in October, and a simulated biological attack is to be rehearsed this month. Despite all this, Mr Barak seemed to recognise the difficulty of curbing Iran's nuclear programme last month when he told a closed meeting with members of parliament that the Qom site "cannot be destroyed through a conventional attack".



Two war games run recently by academics add to the despondency. In one, played out at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, America was ready to live with a nuclear Iran through containment and nuclear deterrence, and exerted strong pressure on Israel not to take military action. In another war game, held at Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies and designed to explore diplomatic options, Iran continued to build up its stock of enriched uranium—even after a simulated Israeli commando raid on one facility under construction.

All this suggests that Israel is drawing up military options to attack Iran, but none of them is very appealing. This may explain Israel's enthusiasm for sanctions. The emergence of an Iranian protest movement raises hopes that the regime could be restrained, perhaps even toppled, by stoking internal pressure.

America is rethinking the wisdom of targeting Iran's most obvious vulnerability: its dependence, because of inefficient refining capacity, on imports of petrol and other fuels. Hillary Clinton, the secretary of state, now says America will seek to impose penalties on the increasingly powerful Revolutionary Guard, "without contributing to the suffering of the ordinary [Iranians], who deserve better than what they currently are receiving."

Mr Netanyahu's lieutenants seem inclined the other way. They say ordinary Iranians will blame their government, not the outside world, for any sanctions; so the embargo should be as crushing as possible. Domestic instability should be encouraged. Only a direct threat to the survival of the regime, they believe, will make it think again about seeking nuclear weapons. It is a harsh view, but for Israel the alternatives are even worse.

Correction: We originally wrote that the Palestinian movement split violently in 2006, when we meant 2007. This was corrected on January 12th 2010.

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