

The Decider

Opponents of an Israeli strike on Iran have focused their ire on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. But it's his hawkish defense minister, Ehud Barak, who is really driving the talk of war.

BY OREN KESSLER | AUGUST 23, 2012

TEL AVIV — Twenty years have passed since Israel first **raised the alarm** over Iran's nuclear program, 10 years since Iranian dissidents **revealed** the enrichment plant at Natanz, and roughly two since pundits started **predicting** an Israeli attack against the Islamic Republic. Today, never have so many Israelis from across the political spectrum agreed that a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities could arrive within months.

Channel 2, Israel's leading newscast, **reported** earlier this month that the foremost advocates of a strike -- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak -- are nearing a final decision on whether to push the button. Meanwhile, *Haaretz* editor-in-chief Aluf Benn **wrote** that Netanyahu wants to attack "in the coming weeks" -- and Yossi Melman, the paper's former intelligence reporter, **estimated** the "window of opportunity" for a strike at 80 days.

Efraim Halevy, the former head of Israel's Mossad spy service and an outspoken **opponent** of a strike, **echoed** the same sentiment. "If I were an Iranian, I would be very fearful of the next 12 weeks," the laconic, British-born septuagenarian said early this month.

While the media often **depict** Netanyahu as the prime mover behind a strike, it is Barak -- the one-time standard-bearer of the Israeli left -- who over the past two years has

emerged as the unlikely champion of military action. This support from Netanyahu's political polar opposite has been crucial in leading Israel to the brink of war.
"Barak is much more of a hawk than Netanyahu," a security analyst and former longtime member of Israel's National Security Council told FP. "The idea that Bibi is the hawk and Barak is a good little boy serves Israel -- it's the good cop, bad cop routine -- but I don't believe there's much of a difference between them on this issue."

"Barak is the stone-cold analyst: What are the objectives? What are the risks?" the former official said. "Bibi comes from a different perspective -- that of the historical leader. Jewish history weighs upon him, and he's leader of the Jewish state, the country with the world's biggest Jewish population."

Netanyahu and Barak view the Iranian nuclear threat in roughly the same terms, analysts told FP, but where they stand on the issue depends largely on where they sit. "Netanyahu is much more prudent, because he's the prime minister and has to make sure he has broad legitimacy from the cabinet and the public," said Uzi Rabi, director of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Tel Aviv University. "Nonetheless, both are of the opinion that something must be done."

According to Rabi, Israeli officials' interminable warnings of an impending strike could be an attempt to prepare the Israeli home front, and international public opinion, for the inevitably messy aftermath of any such action. "What Barak and Netanyahu have done over the past month or so is tell everyone -- the Iranians, Americans and Israeli public -- that a military option could be in the offing," he said."

The duo has also won support -- both inside and outside the government -- for military action. Shabtai Shavit -- a former head of the Mossad spy agency and the last Israeli intelligence attaché in shah-era Iran -- told Channel 2 he doesn't trust American assurances of keeping Tehran in check. "I don't believe it -- even [from] our friends and greatest allies," he said. "When we're talking about my fate, my existence, my survival, I don't let any outside actor to handle it."

That's Netanyahu's mindset too: Visiting the site of a thwarted **kidnap attempt** this month along the Egyptian border, the prime minister said that when it comes to securing

its own citizens, "Israel must and can rely only on itself." The *Jerusalem Post* **editorialized** that the remarks appeared aimed at Washington and Tehran.

Judging by an **interview** with an unnamed Israeli "decision maker" published last weekend in *Haaretz*, Barak appears to share those sentiments in spades. Most Israelis immediately **recognized** the interviewee as the defense minister -- the "decision maker" spoke ominously about the "immunity zone," a pet Barak phrase for the point at which a strike that could significantly damage Iran's nuclear program would be beyond Israel's capabilities.

"For the Americans, the Iranians are not yet approaching the immunity zone -- because the Americans have much larger bombers and bombs, and the ability to repeat the operation a whole number of times," the "decision maker" said. "But for us, Iran could soon enter the immunity zone. And when that happens, it means putting a matter that is vital to our survival in the hands of the United States."

The interviewee also cast doubt on U.S. President Barack Obama's repeated promises to prevent Iran from going nuclear, noting that despite similar pledges, Ronald Reagan didn't keep Pakistan from building a nuclear bomb, nor did Bill Clinton stop North Korea from doing the same. "We mustn't listen to those who in every situation prefer non-action to action," the source said. "Even a cruel reality must be looked at with total clarity. Israel is strong and Israel is responsible, and Israel will do what it has to do."

The interview is long and its argumentation meticulous, but its overall thrust is clear: A military strike would a dangerous and unfortunate -- but possibly inevitable -- choice, one far superior to the alternative of living with a nuclear Iran.

A willingness to use force should come as no surprise to those familiar with the defense minister's political and military background. Barak, 70, is the embodiment of "old Israel" -- the Laborite establishment that settled and farmed the land, built the country's institutions, and dominated its government for three decades after independence. That socialist elite also directed the bulk of Israel's wars and counter-terror operations, and Barak -- the most decorated soldier in Israeli history -- has rarely hesitated to beat his plowshare into a sword.

In 1972, as commander of **Sayeret Matkal**, the army's most elite unit, Barak led the storming of a hijacked plane at Tel Aviv's Ben-Gurion Airport. Dressed as air technicians

in white overalls, Barak and his troops -- who, incidentally, included Netanyahu -- stormed the plane, and within 10 minutes had captured or killed all four hijackers.

The following year Barak, dressed as a woman, snuck into Beirut as head of a hit squad that assassinated dozens of Palestinian guerrillas Israel held responsible for the **Munich Olympics massacre**. Barak was also a key planner of the 1976 **Entebbe operation**, in which Israel dispatched special forces to Uganda on a night raid to free 101 Israeli and Jewish hostages held by Palestinian and German hijackers (this time the **ruse** included a replica of Ugandan dictator Idi Amin's black Mercedes).

Barak, however, has also overseen withdrawals of Israeli power. As prime minister (and simultaneously defense minister) in 2000, he ended Israel's 22-year military occupation of south Lebanon, and the same year entered into the (ultimately unsuccessful) Camp David peace talks with Palestine Liberation Organization chief Yasir Arafat.

Barak, however, remained ready to use force when he deemed it necessary: Reappointed defense minister in 2007, he oversaw the following winter's three-week offensive on the Gaza Strip aimed at stopping Hamas rocket fire on Israeli communities. The same year, he reportedly "**personally directed**" the Israeli air strike on a nuclear reactor being constructed in Syria with the help of Iran and North Korea. Jerusalem had given no prior warning of the operation, and skeptics this time around say all the loose talk of a brewing strike is a signal the warnings are little more than posturing.

"A country that is debating whether to attack or not to attack usually doesn't spill its guts," **said** veteran journalist Motti Kirshenbaum. "I personally believe that it is all really a propaganda show on the part of Barak, that it's all make believe," **wrote** Ben Casspit in the mass-market daily *Maariv*.

A number of Israeli political leaders, however, have said they doubt Netanyahu and Barak are bluffing, and have instead warned that the two are edging the country toward disaster. Shaul Mofaz, head of the opposition Kadima party and an ex-army chief and defense minister, **warned** a strike could not only damage relations with Washington, but also lead to a full-blown regional war. On Aug. 16, Mofaz -- born Shahram Mofazzakar in Tehran -- **accused** proponents of an attack of "risking our children's lives" for the sake of political gain.

That same day, Israeli President Shimon Peres **said** in a pair of televised interviews that the country "cannot go it alone" against Iran. While Peres acknowledged that a nuclear-armed Iran would be an existential threat to the Jewish state, he argued that Israel must

not act in the absence of American support. Officials close to Netanyahu issued a stinging **rebuke**, accusing the president of overstepping his bounds. "When all is said and done," said one minister, "the political leaders call the shots, not the president, who should stick to his ceremonial duties."

Yoel Guzansky, a research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, said the disagreement between Washington and Jerusalem goes beyond the difference in the two countries' military capabilities.

The crux of the issue, he said, is that the United States appears willing to let Iran reach the nuclear "threshold" -- the point where, with little effort and in minimal time, it could "break out" to build a nuclear weapon (a White House spokesman recently said Washington **would know** if Iran made a dash for nukes). From Israel's perspective, however, Tehran must be prevented from even approaching that threshold at all costs. The White House has loudly promoted its success in passing several rounds of U.N. Security Council resolutions sanctioning Iran, and believes diplomatic avenues have not yet been exhausted. Barak, Netanyahu and fellow advocates of a strike -- reportedly **as many as 11** of the 14 members of the Security Cabinet -- are convinced sanctions **have been ineffective**, negotiations are **at a dead end** and military action inevitable. "President Obama doesn't even know if he'll still be sitting in the Oval Office come spring," the anonymous "decision maker" told *Haaretz*. "And if Mitt Romney is elected, history shows that presidents do not undertake dramatic operations in their first year in office unless forced to."

For proponents of a strike, autumn could be the ideal time frame. First, Barak and company argue that Iran could reach the "zone of immunity" within months, after which an Israeli attack would have little effect. Second, the clear fall weather is more conducive to an airstrike than Iran's cloudy winter skies. Third, a strike during the U.S. election season is less likely to earn Obama's condemnation -- and **might even draw** passive U.S. support -- than after the president's potential reelection.

Self-reliance is a pillar of Israel's ethos, and Barak has said the country would "absolutely not" deliberately drag America into war. "A country does not go to war in the hope or expectation that another country will join it," he said this month. "Such an act is an irresponsible gamble." Michael Oren, Jerusalem's ambassador to Washington, **said** this

weekend that the timing of a potential strike has nothing to do with U.S. politics and everything to do with Israeli security.

The precise rationale behind when to strike may remain known only to Israel's most senior decision makers, but the question of whether to do so appears all but settled -- this week, Israeli television **reported** Barak and Netanyahu are "determined" to strike before U.S. elections. Israeli analysts, meanwhile, are convinced American officials underestimate the risks that the decades-old Israel-Iran feud will come to a head before November.

"I recently met a former very senior American diplomat who said the consensus in Washington is that Israel is bluffing, that Barak and Netanyahu are trying to wag the dog and get the U.S. to attack Iran," said Guzansky. "If that's the case, I told him, they've fooled me too."

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