To Attack or Not to Attack: Israel Confronts a Dramatic Decision

Zaki Shalom

In the heat of the public discussion on the possibility of an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stressed that he has not yet decided whether to attack Iran. At the same time, partly in response to opponents of such an attack, he made it clear that the risk of harm to the home front at this point, when Iran still does not have nuclear weapons, is dwarfed by the risks involved in an attack on Israel after Iran has gone nuclear.[1]

Against this background, inter alia, the feverish activity in recent weeks by Netanyahu, his supporters, and the prime minister's bureau to convince those who are sitting on the fence or have reservations about the possibility of an attack on Iran to change their position, is especially noteworthy. In this context, it was announced that the Prime Minister had succeeded in persuading Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman to join the supporters of an attack on Iran.[2] In addition, the Prime Minister's bureau has undertaken an intensive media campaign against President Shimon Peres, who has spoken out against an Israeli attack on Iran.[3] The appointment of Kadima member Avi Dichter, who is known to support an attack on Iran, as minister of Home front defense, is also connected to this issue.[4]

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1 Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu: Threat to Israel's Home Front Dwarfed by Threat of Nuclear Iran," *Ha'aretz*, August 12, 2012, http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/netanyahu-threat-to-israel-s-home-front-dwarfed-by-threat-of-nuclear-iran.premium-1.457616.

2 Barak Ravid, Amos Harel, Zvi Zrahiya, and Jonathan Lis, "Netanyahu Trying to Persuade Cabinet to Support Attack on Iran," *Ha'aretz*, November 2, 2011, http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/netanyahu-trying-to-persuade-cabinet-to-support-attack-on-iran-1.393214.

3 Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu Aides: In Opposing Israeli Attack on Iran, Peres Forgot his Place," *Ha'aretz*, August 16, 2012, http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/netanyahu-aides-in-opposing-israeli-attack-on-iran-peres-forgot-his-place.premium-1.458847.

4 Elad Benari, "Dichter Will Give Netanyahu More Support for Iran Strike," *Arutz 7*, August 15, 2012, http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/158924.

Undoubtedly, the Iranian issue presents Israeli decision makers, and in particular, Prime Minister Netanyahu, with a magnitude of fateful decisions. We believe that the public discussion of this issue is positive in and of itself in a democratic society like Israel. Nevertheless, it is likely to cause damage to the country if it spills over into detailed information about operational issues, and especially, if Israel's capabilities and limitations vis-à-vis Iran are discussed. As long as it remains on the political level and does not get into details of limitations and capabilities, it must be conducted within a serious framework for discussion, professional and politically impartial. Within this framework, it is legitimate for there to be disagreements. Below we will attempt to examine the main questions the Prime Minister will seek to answer when he decides about an attack on Iran.

How successful will an attack be?

On this issue, there is general agreement that Israel cannot replicate in Iran its successes that were achieved in the attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor on June 7, 1981, and in Syria (according to foreign sources) on September 6, 2007. The most prominent statement on this issue was made recently by General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, who stressed that Israel cannot destroy all of Iran's nuclear facilities, only some of them, and that this will delay progress on the Iranian nuclear project for a limited time.[5]

The reasons for this are well known: some of the Iranian nuclear facilities are buried deep in the underground of the earth, and Israel does not have bombs that are capable of penetrating such depths. Iran's nuclear facilities are spread throughout the country, and therefore, a very large number of aircraft will be needed to strike them, perhaps in a round of sorties. It is very doubtful that Israel's order of battle is sufficient for achieving such a goal, especially considering that it would need to leave capabilities for other missions, on other fronts, that are likely to be needed in the wake of an attack on Iran. Furthermore, Israel must take into account the possibility that Iran's defense systems will succeed in intercepting or hitting some of the Israeli attack planes that are flying toward the targets. The bottom line is that we can say with nearly absolute certainty that the damage from an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear facilities would only be limited.

This fact is liable to have far-reaching consequences: First of all, a sense may develop in public opinion, both in Israel and abroad, that the operation was a

5 Natasha Mozgovaya, "U.S. Army Chief: Israel Won't Be Able to Wipe out Iran's Nuclear Program," *Ha'aretz*, August 14, 2012, http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/u-s-army-chief-israel-won-t-be-able-to-wipe-out-iran-s-nuclear-program-1.458256.

failure. It can be assumed that the Iranian regime and others who support it, will make every effort to establish such an awareness. The international media, and perhaps the Israeli media as well, which in any case are not favorably disposed toward the current Israeli government, will most likely pounce, with great enthusiasm, on Israel's partial success, in order to downplay the achievements of the attack. It is nearly certain that officials inside and outside the defense establishment who have recently been warning endlessly against such an attack will join the media in this assault. They will be able to say, perhaps with justification, "We told you so."[6]

A sense that the attack was successful would have tremendous importance in establishing Israel's status and prestige in the international community. It will in particular establish deterrence in Israel-Iran relations and Israel's relations with other hostile states. If an image can be established of a successful attack, this is likely to have positive consequences for Israel's international standing, for its relationship with the US administration and vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority.

A sense of limited success, or a lack of success, is likely to have negative consequences politically, in terms of security, and economically, especially in export of Israeli weapons and advanced technologies. However, it can be argued that this is basically a problem of public relations, and that the real damage on the ground, in contradiction to image and awareness, is what will determine the deterrent effect on Iran and its allies.

We must remember that even in the Second Lebanon War, Israel was only partially successful, and that it had to pay a heavy price in lives and property because of this partial success. Nevertheless, the war has established a fairly effective deterrent. It is a fact that for most of the period since the end of the Second Lebanon War, Israel's northern border has remained quiet. Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nassaralla has been in hiding since the war out of fear that Israel will attack him. In addition, the sense of achievement is dependent to a large extent on the expectations that Israel creates in the context of its attack. If Israel succeeds in creating low expectations, we can assume that there will be less disappointment.[7]

At the same time, Israel can make an assessment that a partial strike against Iranian nuclear facilities that leads to a delay in the Iranian nuclear program, even if it is only for a year or two, is liable to have far-reaching consequences

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6 Netanyahu was recently quoted as saying that *Ha'aretz* and the *New York Times* were Israel's worst enemies. He denied this report. See Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu Denies Calling *Ha'aretz* and *New York Times* Israel's 'Main Enemies,'" *Ha'aretz*, January 19, 2012, http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/netanyahu-denies-calling-haaretz-and-new-york-times-israel-s-main-enemies-1.408167.

7 On Israel's deterrence following the Second Lebanon War, see *The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Perspectives*, edited by Shlomo Brom and Meir Elran (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2007).

way beyond the actual damage to the nuclear facilities. It is likely to greatly strengthen those groups within Iran that oppose or have reservations about the continuing development of Iran's nuclear project, not because they do not recognize its importance to the nation, but because of the costs involved.

They can argue that as long as Iran had not been attacked militarily, it might have been worthwhile to continue with the nuclear project, even at the cost of international isolation, economic sanctions, and mysterious attacks on its military installations, its scientists, and its computers. After an Israeli attack, it will be necessary to calculate the project's desirability on the basis of different criteria than in the past. These groups can argue that the Iranian leadership must ask itself whether it is worthwhile for Iran to pay the heavy price of the nuclear project, and ultimately also to suffer physical destruction of at least some of its nuclear facilities, with the knowledge that in another year or two years, a further attack is possible. This is very doubtful.

Moreover, an Israeli attack on Iran, even if it ends with partial destruction of the nuclear facilities, will perhaps bring about the collapse of the psychological barrier that exists today in regard to an attack on Iran, in both Israel and abroad. All of this assumes, of course, that the price that Israel and US allies will pay for the attack will not be too high. Today, opposition to an Israeli or American attack is growing, mainly due to fears of a massive Iranian response that will set the entire region ablaze and cause tremendous damage to the attacker.

This is perhaps similar to the fears Israel had of entering the refugee camps before Operation Defensive Shield, as well as the fears of massive entry into the Gaza Strip on the eve of Operation Cast Lead, which turned out to be wildly exaggerated. If it becomes clear to the entire world that things are not so bad, and especially that Iran's ability to respond is very limited, then the probability of an attack by Israel or the United States in the future will grow. In any case, Iran's deterrent powers vis-à-vis Israel, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, the United States, and Europe will be harmed.

The US Administration's Response

Based on official statements, the US administration is clearly opposed to an Israeli attack on Iran at the current time, at least until the elections in November. The administration fears, justifiably, that an Israeli attack on Iran is liable to bring about:

a. Only partial damage to Iran's nuclear facilities
b. A great conflagration in the region and a significant worsening of regional instability

c. Dragging the United States into the battle against its will, after enormous efforts by the current administration to withdraw US troops from areas of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan
d. A dramatic increase in the price of oil, which from the point of view of the Obama administration is liable to have serious repercussions for the US and European economy, and for the chances that Obama will win the elections in November

The United States is demanding that Israel place its trust in the unequivocal American promises that the United States is determined to prevent the nuclearization of Iran. These assurances have been given at the most senior echelons of the administration, both openly and in conversations with Prime Minister Netanyahu. At the same time, the United States believes that there is still time left to examine the impact of economic sanctions. In any case, the administration argues that only the United States can cause serious and irreparable destruction to the Iranian nuclear project. Israel, therefore, must wait patiently until the administration decides that the time has come for military action, if it does in fact so decide.[8]

These American positions are pushing the government of Israel into a very uncomfortable corner. The US request that Israel be patient involves a serious gamble for Israel. President Obama is demanding that Prime Minister Netanyahu place his trust in the president's public and secret commitments that he will act against Iran after the presidential elections. The problem is that even Obama is uncertain whether he will continue to serve as president of the United States after the elections. Will Republican candidate Mitt Romney necessarily adopt Obama's commitments on this issue? It is very doubtful. His declarations on the issue of Iran, especially during his visit to Israel, were decisive and unequivocal. However, they did not contain anything new whatsoever compared to President Obama's statements on the issue.[9]

Another question that Israel must answer relates to the issue of time. Defense Minister Barak often speaks of Iran entering the "zone of immunity," that is, a situation in which Israel will no longer be able to launch a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. It is not clear to us when Iran will enter the zone of immunity to an Israeli action. It is also unclear to us whether the zone of immunity also applies to the capabilities of the United States. Within a certain time period in the future, will the United States face a real inability to bring about the destruction of the Iranian nuclear facilities? Another question concerns the scope and depth of Israeli and US intelligence penetration into

8 Elisabeth Bumiller, "Panetta Urges More Time for Economic Pressure on Iran to Work," *New York Times*, July 30, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/31/world/middleeast/leon-panetta-urges-israel-to-allow-more-time-for-iran-sanctions-to-work.html.
9 Ari Shavit, "Romney to *Ha'aretz*: Military Option on Iran Should Not Be Ruled Out," *Ha'aretz*, July 27, 2012, http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/week-s-end/romney-to-haaretz-military-option-on-iran-should-not-be-ruled-out.premium-1.453917.

the Iranian nuclear program. In concrete terms, the question is whether Iran might succeed in achieving nuclear capability without their having had prior information on it? We have no unequivocal answers on that, and it is doubtful that Israel's leadership has such answers either.[10]

Furthermore, during Obama's presidency, Prime Minister Netanyahu and other Israeli government officials have had a serious crisis of confidence in the president. (The crisis of confidence, of course, was mutual. However, in the current situation, it is Israel that needs the help of the United States, and it must have confidence in the administration's commitments toward it, and not the other way around.) President Obama's repudiation of the understandings between the Bush administration and prime ministers Sharon and Olmert concerning construction in the settlements created suspicion toward Obama in the Netanyahu government as early as the first stages of his presidency.

From the beginning, the Obama administration tried to completely renounce the existence of those understandings, even though there can be no doubt that he knew about them. When he was publicly confronted about his error, he squirmed and claimed that even if there were agreements, they had ceased to be relevant in the changing circumstances. Against this background, he demanded a total freeze on settlements. President Obama's conduct toward President Mubarak at the start of the riots in Cairo, and his quickly becoming involved in efforts to bring about Mubarak's ouster, also demonstrated a great lack of credibility in the man who claims to be a loyal ally.[11]

Moreover, Prime Minister Netanyahu gives the impression that president Obama's conduct "on the ground" does not inspire confidence in his sincerity and his intentions to keep his commitments. In his comments at the last AIPAC conference (March 2012), the president stated decisively that the US policy toward Iran is one of prevention, not containment. Obama himself and senior administration officials reiterated that the president does not bluff. The trouble is that a number of weeks after making these statements, Obama expressed moderate views toward Iran at the G8 summit in Washington (May 2012) which China and Russia also attended. In fact, militarily, the president is not backing up his statements with actions that effectively threaten Iran, and it is very clear to him that Iran is not taking seriously his threats that "all options are on the table" as long as it has no proof that the president intends to act on his threats.[12]

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10 Jim Zanotti, Kenneth Katzman, Jeremiah Gertler, and Steven A. Hildreth, *Israel: Possible Military Strike against Iran's Nuclear Facilities,* CRS Report for Congress, March 28, 2012**,** http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R42443.pdf.

11 Elliott Abrams, "Hillary Is Wrong About the Settlements: The U.S. and Israel Reached a Clear Understanding about Natural Growth," *Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 2009, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124588743827950599.html.

12 Zaki Shalom, *Israel and the United States in Disagreement over Iran*, INSS Insight No. 340, June 6, 2012, http://www.inss.org.il/publications.php?cat=21&incat=&read=6691a\.

Ultimately, the Prime Minister must take into account the possibility that the President will somehow succeed in changing the Iranian position, even if only slightly, and in forcing the regime of the ayatollahs to soften its stance and move toward a settlement with the international community on Iranian nuclear activity. The president, for his part, can argue that he has reached a settlement with Iran on nuclear activity that satisfies both the United States and the international community. Can Israel necessarily assume that it, too, will find this settlement acceptable and satisfactory? This is very doubtful.

Moreover, the Prime Minister must take into account that during negotiations with Iran, the question of the Dimona reactor and Israel's nuclear project will also be raised. In both the United States and Israel, some have called for Israel to soften its position on the issue of Israel's nuclear option in exchange for Iranian willingness on Iranian nuclear activity. Can the prime minister be sure that after the US elections, the issue of Israel's nuclear option will not be raised again? Can Israel withstand massive international pressure over Israeli nuclear activity when it will be accused of torpedoing an agreement with Iran? This is very doubtful.[13]

We must take into account that the Prime Minister is raising the bar for threats toward Iran, inter alia, because he recognizes that the current US administration is seeking to prevent an Israeli action before the elections at any price. It would probably be no exaggeration to say that the prime minister is going around with the feeling that the political future of President Obama is to some extent, perhaps even a large extent, in the Prime Minister's hands. An Israeli action at the present time would almost certainly expose the president to serious criticism for his fecklessness, which forced Israel, a close ally of the United States, to act alone. Various segments in the US administration, especially the Congress, will make demands to support Israel.

All this, when the consequences of an Israeli action for the stagnant US economy are liable to be serious.

Under these circumstances, it is not inconceivable that the Prime Minister believes that currently, he can "squeeze" from the president far-reaching commitments in Israel's favor in exchange for Israeli restraint on Iran. This compensation will presumably be mainly in the areas of defense and the economy. Israel, the prime minister can argue, is prepared to take a strategic risk on the Iranian issue, if it knows that the US administration will support it and will be prepared to give it aid that under normal circumstances, it would not be prepared to give.

The prime minister can assume that the official position of the Obama

13 Zaki Shalom, *Israel's Nuclear Option: Behind The Scenes Diplomacy Between Dimona and Washington* (Sussex Academic Press).

administration toward an Israeli attack on Iran does not accurately reflect the "true" positions of the administration on this sensitive issue. It shows, first and foremost, the administration's lack of confidence that an Israeli action will be successful. Statements by many Israeli officials, and in particular, defense establishment officials, clearly show uncertainty as to the chances that an attack on Iran will succeed. Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that the United States has tremendous reservations about an Israeli attack. The prime minister may estimate that if Israel showed confidence that the attack would be successful; it is very possible that the position of the administration would be different, much less hesitant, than it appears to be today.

In this context, the Prime Minister might assess that the administration's response to an Israeli strike against Iran will be dictated to a large extent by how successful it is. If the strike causes heavy damage to Iran's nuclear facilities; if it is "sterile" and causes minimal damage to the populace that is not involved; if the Iranian response against Israel, the United States, and its allies in the region is measured and "tolerable," then in all likelihood, the US administration will refrain from real criticism of Israel, and will perhaps even attempt to reap the benefits and present itself as a partner in the success.

The Prime Minister can assume that an Israeli attack prior to the November 2012 elections will make it very difficult for the Obama administration to criticize Israel openly. He can assume with near certainty that as soon as the attack begins, members of Congress, the media, Jewish leaders, and Republican Party leaders will issue statements supporting Israel and even demand that the administration back Israel and defend it. The Obama administration cannot ignore such expressions of support in the period leading up to the elections.

The Response of Iran and Its Allies

Prime Minister Netanyahu must take into account that after an Israeli attack, Iran will have to respond. We do not know precisely what response Iran is capable of. Another unknown involves the question whether Iran will choose to "break the rules" and respond with full force against Israel, or whether it will make do with a measured response that it will be able to present as appropriate for the "Zionist aggressor" without risking a massive Israeli counter-response. We can assume that Iran, like many other states in the international system, believes that Israel has capabilities, not yet used, to cause it intolerable damage if in fact a war takes place in the region in which each side exhausts all of its capabilities against its opponent. Publicly, Iran has recently been demonstrably dismissive of Israel's determination and capabilities to attack it. Is this the same assessment being made by the

Iranian government behind closed doors? This is very doubtful.[14]

It is not clear to us, or, we can assume, to Prime Minister Netanyahu, how Iran's allies in the region ~~S~~yria, Hezbollah, and to some extent, Hamas in Gaza ~~w~~ould respond. Would they join the battle, and if so, would they content themselves with a limited response just to fulfill their obligations to their allies, or would they also seek to demonstrate their loyalty to Iran through massive firing of rockets and missiles at Israel? In Israel, the prevailing view is that Hizbullah has enormous quantities of missiles and rockets that can reach the center of Israel. If it seeks to use all the means at its disposal, there is no doubt that Israel will be dealt a heavy blow. As for Syria, it is very possible that the Bashar al-Assad regime would seek to take advantage of the conflict with Iran in order to enter the battle against Israel. The regime can present the battle as a fateful struggle against the "Zionist enemy." It is likely to call on the insurgent forces to lay down their arms and to stop their campaign against the regime in order to unite against the common enemy, the State of Israel.

Prime Minister Netanyahu must take into account that in the absence of a dramatically successful operation against Iran, in almost any scenario there would be a widespread demand to establish a commission of inquiry into the conduct of the Netanyahu government on the Iranian issue. Various groups are already making this demand. The unprecedented public opposition in Israel to a strike against Iran, which has been going on for many months, could not fail to lead to a widespread demand by the public, the media, and politicians to investigate the decision-making process behind a strike. Such an investigation would be likely to lead to harsh criticism of that decision-making process. This might undermine the stability of his government, and perhaps even lead to the end of his political career.

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14 Jpost.com Staff, "Iran: Israel Afraid, Response to Attack Will Be Devastating," *Jerusalem Post*, August 20, 2012, http://www.jpost.com/Headlines/Article.aspx?id=281931.