

A Military Attack on Iran? Considerations for Israeli Decision Making

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In the coming months, Israel's national leadership may need to decide whether or not to attack nuclear installations in Iran. This will be one of the most complex decisions since the establishment of Israel. The purpose of this article is to structure the discussion that will necessarily be held by the leadership as it sits down to reach a decision. The article is not designed to reach a particular conclusion, rather to point out the central questions that must be examined and start to sketch the considerations influencing the issues. Among the questions are:

- a. **The actors:** Who are the relevant actors and what are their interests? What strategic purpose does Israel hope to achieve?
- b. **The alternatives:** What are the ramifications for Israel of a nuclear Iran and what are the ramifications of attacking Iran? What is the greater risk: a nuclear Iran or an attack on it?
- c. **The time frame:** Should the two alternatives be examined from the short or long terms? What are the purely temporary ramifications ("the dust will settle") and what subsequent trends will only intensify in years to come?
- d. **The achievable objectives:** Can an attack even stop Iran from becoming nuclear? Would an attack stop the nuclear process directly, or are the non-military follow-on trends generated by the attack the only way to stop it?
- e. **Subsequent trends:** If the post-attack follow-on trends are essential to achievement of the desired objective, how can Israel influence them?

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Which tools are likely to accelerate desirable follow-on trends and deflect dangerous ones?

- f. **The necessity:** If only international follow-on trends are capable of attaining the strategic objective, is an attack even necessary in order to set these trends in motion? Is it possible to set them in motion even without an attack?
- g. **Measures of success:** How does one measure the success of an attack on Iran? Is the parameter operational (the military mission), physical (destruction of the nuclear installations), or something completely different? When will it be possible to measure the success of the attack?
- h. **The American variable:** Can the United States be expected to give a green light to an attack? What is the meaning of attacking without a green light? Are there alternatives to American support in terms of steering post-attack trends?

Full answers to such complex questions lie beyond the scope of this discussion, and thus this essay intends only to jumpstart and frame the debate, while focusing on critical aspects for consideration that have not yet received the requisite attention in the public discourse. The questions will not necessarily be examined in the above order, nor will internal Israeli political considerations be examined. And while some of the topics discussed herein lie right at the heart of the realm of uncertainty, even in that realm decisions must ultimately be made.

The main value of an attack does not lie in the direct physical damage to the nuclear program, rather in the subsequent political trends necessary to realize the strategic goal.

For the purpose of the discussion that follows, certain working assumptions – which may legitimately be challenged – will be made. One such assumption is that Israel’s strategic purpose is to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons – for a lengthy period of time. A second working assumption is that an attack would occur with a red light from the United States. The article will subsequently examine the calculations in the case of a yellow or a green light from the United States.

Can an Israeli Attack Stop the Nuclear Program?

The preliminary question that must be addressed is whether attacking Iranian nuclear installations can deliver the strategic goal, or whether

Iran would rebuild its capabilities and complete its nuclear weapon building after a limited delay. In order to examine this question (and not be waylaid by operational and intelligence issues), let us assume that Israel is capable of rendering extensive physical damage to Iranian nuclear infrastructures, but also that given enough time and will, Iran would have the capability of rebuilding the program and completing it. According to these assumptions, an attack would deny Iran nuclear weapons – for an extended period that goes beyond the mere time needed by Iran for physical reconstruction of its nuclear infrastructures – only given one of several possibilities.

The first possibility is that an attack would impair not only Iran’s capabilities but also its will to go nuclear (as happened in part by the attack in Iraq in 1981 and the attack attributed to Israel in Syria in 2007). However, as discussed below, gaining a nuclear capability is a supreme Iranian priority and Iran has proven that it is willing to assume significant risks to make it happen. Iran is firmly committed to the nuclear program and it has harnessed many of its national resources to advance it. It is therefore difficult to presume that a one-off strike would quell the desire for nuclear weapons. A second possibility is repetitive Israeli strikes whenever the Iranian nuclear program reaches a critical stage. This is a policy requiring a great deal of national staying power and tremendous international political strength, and thus its viability is doubtful. Israel is good at sprints but would find a marathon difficult to run, especially if the action is taken in defiance of the international community.

The third possibility is that an attack would generate non-military follow-on processes, and that these economic, internal, or international political trends would induce Iran to abandon the program. For example, an attack might undermine the stability of the regime or it might target Iranian economic infrastructures; the consequent economic blow could in turn set the desired processes within Iran in motion. However, the chances of success of this possibility are at best unclear, because the attempt to set off internal processes within other nations has a proven track record

Unlike the scenario of attacking Iran, in which the costs that Israel would pay – at least some – would be short term, the follow-on trends generated by a nuclear Iran are liable to become more serious with time.

of failure (the First Lebanon War, the Sinai Campaign, the Agudot HaKfarim peasants' association in the West Bank, Afghanistan, Iraq, Cuba, and others). Therefore, the attempt to generate internal processes in Iran is too unpredictable and unreliable to serve as the basis for a plan.

An Israeli attack might yield an international post-attack process that would in turn generate the desired goal. It may be that the international community would take effective economic and military steps against Iran, force it to concede its nuclear program, and impose an effective denuclearization verification regimen. This alternative may be attainable, but the decision makers would have to be convinced of two points: one, that an attack would indeed yield such subsequent international processes, and two, that an attack is crucial for generating the desired international process. In other words, it is in fact impossible to set this process in motion in a rapid and timely manner without an attack (the latter point will be discussed at length below).

Attacking Iranian nuclear installations would demonstrate to the international community and the United States that Israel is credible and determined in its claim that it cannot accept a nuclear Iran, and that Israel is willing to assume serious risks and pay a heavy price in order to prevent Iran's nuclearization. Should Israel demonstrate that it indeed views a nuclear Iran as an existential threat, that this is not simply a hollow slogan, and that it is committed to preventing the nuclearization of Iran even at the cost of a massive avalanche of criticism, the international community will have to take this into account. Because of the prevailing understandable doubts regarding Israel's credibility and determination on the matter, the

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attack would be a new factor that would have to be considered and might perhaps yield the desired international process. It is also possible that in order to demonstrate determination, decisiveness, and tenacity, it would be necessary for Israel to engage in more than just a handful of pinpoint attacks and undertake an ongoing campaign, despite international pressures to cease.

Thus the main value of an attack does not lie in the direct physical damage to the nuclear program, rather in the political follow-on trends necessary to realize the strategic goal. The leadership must focus on this point and assess whether or not it is capable of sketching a credible,

serious scenario of how an attack would yield the desired political post-attack process. Directing international processes is necessarily a complex and difficult endeavor, and has never proven to be one of Israel's relative strengths. Worse still, given an American red light, the attack might be seen as illegitimate, and therefore the leadership would also have to be convinced that it could repel dangerous follow-on processes, such as the demand for a comprehensive, Middle East-wide nuclear disarmament.

Egypt and Saudi Arabia as Keys to Influencing Follow-on Processes

Creating desirable post-attack processes is not impossible and to an extent resembles the Egyptian attack on Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. There too, the attack was not designed to attain Egypt's strategic goal directly. Rather, its purpose was to create the conditions for the United States to push Israel into withdrawing from the Sinai, following Egypt's demonstration to the United States that Israel's continued presence in Sinai presented significant risks for the US, and the demonstration to the international community that the situation created in 1967 had left Egypt with no choice but to go to war. The Egyptian attack merely served as a catalyst and created the context for setting an international process in motion. If so, the question is whether the relevant staffs and headquarters in Israel know how to set in motion and steer international processes in this manner and how precisely to affect the political post-attack trends.

Unlike in 1973, when it comes to Iran's nuclear program Egypt and Israel find themselves on the same strategic side, along with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf emirates. This is one of Israel's most important strategic assets today. Clearly, Egypt and Saudi Arabia would find it convenient to have Israel act against Iran and have Israel pay the price while they play the role of spectators, ostensibly opposed to an attack. However, if the United States were to withhold the green light, Israel's political weakness might keep it from attacking. The United States and Iran might continue playing for time, and such time would allow Iran to go nuclear. Clearly this is not in the best interests of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and Israel would have to know how to take advantage of this situation. The question is how to enlist Egypt and Saudi Arabia in an effort to steer the post-attack processes.

Driving Iran's Strategy Out of the Balance

Another way in which attacking Iran could yield the desired result would be to drive Iran to deviate from its (thus far successful) strategy of acquiring nuclear weapons. The reasoning calls for broadening the discussion: Iran seeks to strengthen its status as a regional hegemon and as a state with a leadership signature of global proportions. It also seeks to weaken its traditional enemies (the Arabs, the Sunnis, Russia, and the West), exhaust their armed forces in secondary theaters, dismantle potential anti-Iran coalitions, and surround itself with a strategic security zone of weak or failing states as well as non-state satellites or proxies capable of reining in states (Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and so forth). Iran's grand strategy is that of a strong-weak state (somewhat similar to the case of China): it sees itself as a strong player and sets itself ambitious goals, but it is also aware of its underlying weaknesses and therefore avoids direct confrontations, prefers to exhaust its enemies by using proxies and acting indirectly, and is motivated by fear. For Iran, the survival of the regime is not enough; it sees itself as a reputable member of the international community. In this context, the nuclear program is of supreme value for establishing itself as a strong, leading state, for having a defensive card to play against a Sunni Arab front (Iran has already been attacked with chemical weapons) or against the superpowers (the scenario of Iraq in 2003 or of Kosovo in 1999), and for possessing an umbrella that will allow it in certain cases to move from an indirect to a direct military approach.

Iran's strategy for realizing its nuclear objectives is based on several components, first, attaining the semblance of deterrence that exceeds its real military capabilities. Iran has an outdated military with limited direct operational capabilities and middling missile and naval capabilities, while its indirect capabilities are not much greater than those already demonstrated by its proxies in Iraq and Lebanon. Still, Iran projects an almost apocalyptic image of deterrence, as reflected in a statement made by the Russian president to the effect that attacking Iran would generate an all-out world war involving nuclear weapons¹ or the concern expressed regarding disruptions to the global oil supply for an extended period. Second, at present Iran prefers to broaden its nuclear infrastructures and its nuclear program's redundancy over charging straight to weapons construction. Thus it both projects the message that the wide redundancy makes attacking it pointless and avoids the risk of

becoming a state under siege. Third, Iran conducts a threshold policy that renders the world accustomed to its positions, while red lines are eroded and Iran gains time. It adopts a defiant position, reexamines it, withdraws from it, returns to it in response to some Western move, and so forth. Thus, Iran's position is – intentionally – unclear; meantime, the international community gradually acquiesces to some of Iran's more far reaching stances. At the same time, Iran preserves its capacity for tactical retreats at critical junctures, and more time passes.

However, an attack might in fact be able to upset Iran's strategy to realize its nuclear ambitions. First, it would probably undermine its shield of deterrence and expose the limitations of Iran's response. As detailed below, Iran's response would likely be harsh, but temporary and most definitely non-apocalyptic. Iran has weaknesses, such as its refined oil needs, and therefore is vulnerable to opposing and restraining leverage; hence its staying power in high to medium intensity direct confrontations is very limited.

Second, an attack would confront Iran with two problematic alternatives. On the one hand, if it continues with its present strategy of expanding infrastructures without pushing forward to weapons construction – but with reduced capabilities as a result of the attack – it will be made clear to all that it is still possible to roll back the nuclear program. An attack would undermine Iran's attempt to send the message that because of the redundancy it is useless to attack its installations and because of its determination it cannot be stopped, and this would encourage international pressures. On the other hand, should Iran seek to change its strategy and accelerate its weapons construction with residual capabilities that would survive an attack, it would be forced to concede its threshold policy and commit to a clear position, and that would accelerate international activity against it. The attack may perhaps not annihilate the Iranian nuclear infrastructure, but the Israeli leadership may conclude that it would upset the balance of Iran's successful strategy.

What is Worse – Attacking or not Attacking?

For the sake of structuring the discussion, let us assume that the Israeli leadership must make a choice between only two simplistic options: an Israeli attack within the next few months or a nuclear Iran at the end of this period. Reality is obviously more complex and there is a spectrum

of intermediate states and possibilities, but presenting the question in this way brings the dilemma into sharper relief. Let us also assume that the attack would indeed prevent a nuclear Iran for an extended period (because we would not attack unless we determined that was the situation), and, as noted, the United States has issued a red light regarding an attack. Another assumption is that we calculate the alternatives from the perspective of 2016 – some five years after the attack and after the immediate shockwaves of the attack (military, political, and economic) have passed. The idea is to analyze which ramifications are temporary, where the “dust will settle,” and which follow-on trends would actually worsen with the passage of time. 2016 is a useful year for examining the results because that year the present American administration would change (unless a new administration takes office already in 2012), and Israel would have a chance for a fresh start with the White House.

The analysis below shows that the Israeli leadership does not have the luxury of choosing between a good and a bad alternative, but must choose the lesser of two evils. Moreover, it may perhaps be possible to sketch out the first developments that would occur after an attack on Iran or after it has become nuclear, but it is difficult to characterize the long term strategic trends that would be set in motion by each alternative. The leadership must choose which Pandora’s box to open while the contents and volumes of the two boxes are difficult to estimate.

The scope of this essay limits an in-depth analysis of the results of each alternative, but some defining outlines are possible. An Israeli attack against Iran would yield results on several levels. First, we could expect an Iranian military response against Israel, either directly or by means of Hizbollah and others (even including another war in Lebanon). A direct Iranian response would be possible both against Israel itself and against its interests around the world (from embassies to seaways and airways). The military response may be characterized by a high intensity response for a short period or by the attempt to exhaust Israel with a prolonged effort of variable intensity. Second, Iran may also respond militarily against others, such as the Gulf states and the United States forces in the Middle East, or use terrorism around the globe. The expansion of Iran’s response beyond Israel alone towards third parties is not self-evident, especially with Israel operating under red light conditions. There are reasons for Iran to attempt to set the political follow-on vector in its favor

precisely by limiting its response to Israel alone and there are opposing calculations for expanding the circle of targets for response. Third, should Iran choose a wide response, it is likely also to include oil resources and airways and seaways, which would take a heavy economic toll from the world and Israel. Fourth, under red light conditions, Israel might incur extreme punitive measures from the United States and the West (from stopping arms and military spare parts to economic and diplomatic sanctions, at least on the scale of what occurred after the attack on the Iraqi reactor in 1981). The more Iran responds towards third parties, so the probability grows that the United States would intervene directly in the fighting, but at the same time this might intensify America's punitive measures against Israel. This would create a dilemma for the Iranian leadership.

Of these results, what would remain in 2016? One may assume that high to medium intensity warfare will have died down, even if not all the scores would have been settled, and that terrorism will not disappear. Since Iran itself would go bankrupt and its economy grind to a halt should shipping lanes be closed for an extended time, this is an improbable scenario. The West's punitive measures against Israel will also likely have died down, especially if there is a change in the US administration. However, this does not mean that the long term risks to Israel are negligible: Israel might unwillingly find itself part of a post-attack externally-imposed regional arrangement and might have to face follow-on trends such as pan-Middle Eastern nuclear disarmament attempts or attempts to otherwise limit Israel's strategic capabilities as part of a new regional equation. Israel might also be seen by American public opinion as having entangled the United States in a war, and this would erode its public support there. Before Israel decides to attack Iran it must consider the short term punitive measures that may well be levied against it, and it must also plan how to repel post-attack processes that might generate long term strategic damage to Israel's strength and capabilities.

What is the meaning of a nuclear Iran, and can Israel live with such a scenario? The ultimate threat, of course, is the use of nuclear weapons, and one should examine how to cope with such a threat outside the framework of this article. However, even without the use of nuclear weapons, the regional and global reality might undergo severe strategic shockwaves.² Technology and materials are liable to trickle into third

party hands, including non-state entities. A regional nuclear arms race could develop and include regimes of questionable stability. The expansion of the nuclear club to include multiple actors, including non-state or unstable state actors, creates the risk that it would be impossible to maintain mutual deterrence such as existed between the United States and the Soviet Union. The basic game theory assumptions of the nuclear rule of mutually assured destruction (MAD) would simply not be met.

Iran is liable to gain hegemony and set the tone for the Near East. Empowered militarily and politically and virtually immune to direct military threats, Iran would become a dominant entity sending its tentacles forth from Iraq, through Bahrain, the Straits of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb, Yemen, the Horn of Africa, Sudan, Gaza, and Lebanon, to Afghanistan and Central Asia. A nuclear Iran would be more daring in sub-nuclear confrontations and would be likely to offer its nuclear umbrella to its allies, such as Syria and Hizbollah. An empowered and decisive Iran would be liable to subvert moderate Arab and central Asian regimes, undermine existing Arab peace agreements with Israel, and foil future peace processes. A nuclear Iran that emerges in face of unequivocal American and Israeli opposition would undercut the strategic credibility of both nations, weaken their deterrence and power projection, hasten the waning of American influence in the region, and undermine the regional order we have known since 1991.

What about 2016? Unlike the scenario of attacking Iran, in which the costs that Israel would pay – at least some – would be short term, and their dust – at least in part – settled, the follow-on trends generated by a nuclear Iran are liable to become more serious with the passage of time. A nuclear Iran becomes untouchable: other players would hesitate to oppose it and would gradually grow closer to it, the projection of its national power would grow, and it would amass more and more influence. Regional stability would be eroded and chances for peace in 2016 would be much lower should Iran attain nuclear capabilities. Moreover, it is not clear that the threat of an Iranian response to an attack is a cogent argument, because anyone who fears the response of a non-nuclear Iran has much more to fear from a nuclear Iran.

Is there an Effective Alternative to an Attack?

The Israeli leadership could consider non-military alternatives that meet two criteria: the first, that they may be expected to show results within a few months. Taking the most severe intelligence assessments into account and in order to leave enough time for a military alternative should the non-military option fail, Israeli leaders cannot give a non-military option more than a few trial months to prove itself. The second criterion is that the non-military option must be concrete, characterized by self-evident cause and effect relations, and be reliable enough to form the basis for a plan. (For example, actions designed to undermine the regime in Tehran do not meet the second criterion and therefore neither the first.)

Thus, if we are looking for leverage that is physical and immediate, it seems that the primary leverage meeting the criteria is an embargo on refined oil. Such an embargo would have to be shared by the entire international community or be accompanied by a naval blockade, because there is no point to a Western embargo if other nations continue supplying Iran with refined oil. (Some claim that cutting Iran's banks out of the global banking system would generate a similar effect, but for the sake of the simplicity of the discussion the focus here is on refined oil.)

For an oil embargo to work, it must begin immediately and be enforced on the whole global refinery industry. The Israeli leadership would have to decide if that is a credible, reasonable scenario. The signs are not encouraging. Unlike Israel, to whom the Iranian threat is immediate and existential, for most of the international community a nuclear Iran, while undesirable, is something it can live with and contain.³ Whether their perspectives differ, their interests diverge, or because of psychological repression, the immediate costs and risks that most of the international community is willing to incur in this context are limited. There is a difference between Israel's calculations regarding the cost and risk that merit undertaking the removal of the threat and the calculations of the United States, not to mention Russia or China.

Ironically, Iran and most of the world (except for Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia) have a shared interest in playing for time: the Americans in

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order to avoid the need for difficult decisions and the Iranians in order to advance the nuclear program. However, time is a honey trap: the diplomatic process is lengthy, one round of talks follows another, the superpowers seek a common denominator (which is too low, and certainly not an immediate comprehensive embargo on refined oil), Iran slowly formulates its tortuous answers, and months pass. The Israeli leadership must withstand the temptation of these time consuming moves that bear the appearance of progress, because time allows Iran to pass more and more milestones.

Also ironically, what are likely to accelerate the diplomatic process are concrete preparations by Israel for a military action. The one who wants peace must prepare for war, and the one who prepares for war may be rewarded with peace. Is determining a D-day for an Israeli attack the move that would inadvertently generate the refined oil embargo?

The United States Position

An American approval of an attack, whether explicit or implied, would make an Israeli decision to attack much easier. First, it would make it easier to steer the political post-attack process towards an imposed end of the Iranian nuclear program and a long term denuclearization enforcement regimen. Second, it would reduce the price Israel would have to pay. Iran would in any case respond militarily against Israel, whether directly or indirectly. And should the Straits of Hormuz be closed, Israel would share the economic burden with the rest of the world, but the legitimacy afforded by the United States would spare Israel both punitive measures from the West and attempts to involve it in a new imposed regional order or limit its strategic power.

The Israeli leadership must make every effort to coordinate its steps with the United States, but because of the ticking clock it must also assess the amount of time to be allotted and the prospects for success. Israel and the United States share basic interests and their worldviews are usually similar. In certain scenarios, it is convenient for the United States that Israel attack, whether with tacit American agreement or with its symbolic opposition.

Nevertheless, other than the fact that the United States is already embroiled in two regional wars and its appetite for moves liable to entangle it in a third is practically nonexistent, and in addition to the

fact that the current president's worldview differs from that of most of his predecessors, two considerations are liable to cast a shadow on green or yellow light scenarios: first, the timetable for making a decision. Washington's approach to the hourglass is more liberal than Israel's and the administration has in practice allowed years to pass. Indeed, Iran has already missed several American deadlines with the Americans' silent acquiescence. It is hard to imagine an Israeli-American agreement even on the issue of when to decide on a green or yellow light. Without agreement on when a decision on a green light must be made, one may assume that the green light will not be given.

Second, there is a limited range of situations in which it would potentially make sense for the United States to be a partner to the cost of an attack without enjoying the benefits of carrying out the attack itself. The United States has more capabilities than Israel to act not only against the nuclear program but also against Iran's regular response capabilities (such as the Iranian navy), to effect widespread damage to the Iranian regime, and to continue a routine of attacks over time. Therefore, an expanded American campaign would be more effective than pinpoint Israeli attacks. Given an American sense that it does not have to act and bear the consequences, it is hard to see how it would approve a less effective attack yet assume the risk of sharing the costs and dangers of an attack.

Nonetheless, two other calculations actually figure in the opposite direction. First, the United States' calculations the day after the attack may be different from those of the day before the attack (especially if the attack is viewed as successful). In the eye of the storm, nations tend to resort to their fundamental interests and stick with their natural allies. The storm shifts the perspective from shades of gray back to a world of black and white. Thus, despite the sometimes tense relations between Roosevelt and Churchill because of Great Britain's attempt to involve the United States in the war in 1939-1941, from the moment the Americans joined the war the basic strategic interest overcame the discomfort generated by Great Britain's sometimes devious conduct. Here, the fundamental interest of the United States is to strengthen Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, to protect Jordan, Lebanon, and the Gulf states, and to remove Iran's hands from the global oil valve, i.e., Hormuz. America's basic interest is to prevent defiant, terror-sponsoring states that challenge

it from becoming nuclear. The rest is merely the difficulties of day-to-day life, the exhaustion of the American defense establishment by the attrition in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the constraints of public diplomacy. (And even if the United States takes punitive measures against Israel, this does not necessarily preclude it from taking advantage of an attack in order to dismantle the Iranian nuclear project.)

Second, Israel must persuade the American defense establishment that attacking and weakening Iran enables America's exit strategy from Iraq and perhaps even from Afghanistan. An American withdrawal from Iraq under present circumstances would be irresponsible and liable to result in a strategic disaster. The day after, Iran would become the most influential foreign power in Iraq. This would also represent a direct threat to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the Gulf states, and Jordan. South Vietnam fell a short time after the United States withdrew from the area, but Iraq and the Straits of Hormuz falling into Iranian hands is simply unacceptable. On the other hand, attacking Iran and imposing a nuclear enforcement regimen would undermine Iran's strategic strength, its image as a winner, its ability to project national strength, and the momentum in which it continues to gather regional influence. This would help rebuild the United States' ability to project power and exert its influence over the region. This would generate conditions critical to a more responsible withdrawal from Iraq. An effective move against Iran, the state leading radical Islam and global terrorism, is also likely to advance a withdrawal from Afghanistan. A blow against the great lion would create the context and conditions for exiting the confrontation with the little fox.

An Attack as a Catalyst for International Processes

The responsibility of the Israeli prime minister and the minister of defense for a military action is not merely ministerial; it is substantive. Only they are capable of shaping and conducting a multidisciplinary strategy and achieving the critical synergy between military, clandestine, diplomatic, political, and economic efforts. Should the Israeli leaders decide to attack Iran, this would be much more than an operational move aimed at Iranian targets: it would be a political move addressed to the international community. When the landing gear of the returning airplanes touch down on the runways, perhaps one mission will have ended, but the main campaign will have only just begun. The importance of the attack

lies not in its physical operational result, rather in demonstrating to the international community that this is an acute, burning, unavoidable problem, demanding direct, effective, and immediate action. The Israeli leadership would have to focus on the question of how to leverage the attack such that it would set in motion international follow-on processes that would stop a nuclear Iran and tap all possible assets, including Egyptian and Saudi Arabian interests. On the other hand, the leadership is also charged with the responsibility of minimizing Israel's long range strategic damage and repelling dangerous post-attack trends, such as attempts to force Israel to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. These are the goods that the IDF alone cannot deliver; it is up to the political echelon to do so.

Preventing Iran from becoming nuclear is the most important issue on Israel's agenda. This means that all other policy issues must be subordinated to that goal or at the very least be synchronized with it. The political echelon is obligated to shape now, before an attack, the political reality that would serve it optimally after the attack. So, for example, it must ask itself what is the best situation regarding talks with the Palestinians when Israel attacks Iran and what its relations with the White House should be like at that time (incidentally, the answer is not trivial and necessitates sophisticated thinking, as it can well be counterintuitive). At the same time, it is necessary to examine Israel's response to different events, for example, the Turkish flotilla to the Gaza Strip, with the yardstick of shaping a political reality that is most effective for the day after an attack on Iran.

The paradox is that the more the relations of the Israeli political echelon with the White House deteriorate, so the motivation of the Israeli political echelon to attack Iran might increase: first, because sans strategic support from the United States, Israel has less to lose; second, because undermining the internal Israeli status of the prime minister is liable to create a situation in which he has less to lose; third, it changes the agenda and avoids negotiations with the Palestinians in a setting in which it seems as if all the pressure is directed against Israel; and fourth, because if the impression is created that American support for Israel is weakening, the Arabs will be less deterred by Israel and the probability for war anyway increases.

If the quotation attributed to Prime Minister Netanyahu, “The year is 1938 and Iran is Germany,”⁴ is correct, the answer to the question of whether to attack – at least Netanyahu’s answer – is obvious. Clearly, had Israel existed in 1938 and had it had the capability of attacking Berlin, it would have been right to attack, even at the cost of a severe confrontation with Roosevelt, Chamberlain, and Daladier. However, a decision to attack is complex and the leadership must first be convinced it has mapped out the entire matrix of relevant considerations, has weighed the claims for and against, and has arrived at serious, well-founded answers to the questions raised in this essay.

Notes

- 1 Reuters Agency, April 13, 2010.
- 2 For more, see Ron Tira, “Shifting Tectonic Plates: Basic Assumptions on the Peace Process Revisited,” *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 12, no. 1 (June 2009): 91-107, [http://www.inss.org.il/upload/\(FILE\)1244445236.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/upload/(FILE)1244445236.pdf).
- 3 See, for example, George Freeman, “Thinking about the Unthinkable: A US-Iranian Deal,” *Stratford Global Intelligence*, March 1, 2010.
- 4 Aluf Benn, “Churchill and His Pupil,” *Haaretz*, October 7, 2009.