

A Green Light on Iran?

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In recent months there has been increased public discussion in the United States about military action against Iranian nuclear sites.¹ The question is twofold: Should the United States take military action against Iran, and should the US administration give Israel a green light to attack Iran if the administration itself prefers not to attack. One reason for the timing of the debate is the shortened timetable, with the intelligence communities in the United States and Israel estimating that from a technical point of view, Iran could obtain a first nuclear bomb within about a year. These estimates are supported by reports of the International Atomic Energy Agency that Iran has amassed enough low level enriched uranium that, if enriched to a high level, can suffice for two or three bombs. Added to this are recent revelations about the improvement – with North Korean assistance – in Iran’s missile array, which is likely to provide Iran with the ability to strike parts of Europe. The second reason is that thus far, despite the intensification of sanctions, Iran has not stopped its pursuit of nuclear weapons, and in the eyes of many experts, including in the US administration, the sanctions will ultimately not motivate Iran to do so. The third reason is the impression in the United States that the current government in Israel, and Prime Minister Netanyahu in particular, will take a harder line toward Iran than did preceding governments, and will be prepared to make a decision to take military action given the conviction that a nuclear Iran is an existential threat.

Nevertheless, an American or Israeli military action against Iran is still apparently not on the short term agenda, for several reasons. At this stage, priority is given to attempt to change Iran’s position through

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diplomacy and tighter sanctions. Despite the doubts that the sanctions will moderate Iran's defiance, it is clear to all governments concerned that this path has not yet been exhausted, and it is still not possible to reach definitive conclusions concerning its outcome. Furthermore, according to American and Israeli intelligence assessments, the Iranian nuclear program is encountering technical difficulties and glitches — including as a result of the computer worm that struck some of Iran's nuclear sites — and there is still time before it reaches its final stages. No less important, both intelligence communities assess that Iran has not yet decided to break out towards a nuclear bomb and apparently does not intend to do so soon, preferring to wait for an appropriate moment. Thus there is still a window of opportunity, albeit narrow, before the point where a decision on a military action against Iran must be taken.

This article examines American and Israeli considerations concerning military action against Iran, and reviews how the American position may influence Israel's deliberations.

Israel's Considerations

Like other concerned governments, Israel would prefer that the Iranian nuclear program be stopped by diplomatic means, supported by meaningful sanctions. At the same time, since it has always been doubtful that diplomacy would move Iran to halt its nuclear program, Israel has stressed repeatedly that it is considering the military option as well; from time to time, this statement has been accompanied by leaks concerning Israeli preparations towards military action. Israel has suggested to the US that it too take steps towards a military option, but the administration has shunned this suggestion and thus far has not raised the threat profile for an attack on Iran.

An Israeli decision on military action against Iran would depend on at least three timetables, which are not necessarily synchronized. First, Israel will find it very difficult to act against Iran before the diplomatic approach is exhausted and as long as, in the assessments of the governments concerned, particularly the US administration, there is still a chance of stopping Iran through a diplomacy and sanctions package. If Israel attacks Iran before it is agreed that the diplomatic approach has been exhausted, Israel will be accused of causing it to fail. This consideration is liable to cause a dilemma for Israel, because if it becomes

clear that the US administration is prepared to reconcile itself to a nuclear Iran, it will increase Israel's motivation to prevent this danger through a military move. Second, the possible timetable for military action will be a function of intelligence assessments about the time remaining until the first atomic bomb is built. Once Iran obtains its first bomb, or even after it produces enough fissile material for a first bomb, military action will no longer be appropriate, because Iran could hide the bomb or the material in a secret facility and it would be impossible to guarantee a successful attack. Third is an operative timetable for a decision: when will there be optimal conditions for an attack – in terms of Israel's obtaining high quality intelligence and completing the preparations for an attack. This advance work must occur against the background of Iran's own preparations, including an improvement in its ability to protect and defend its nuclear sites and in its response capabilities vis-à-vis Israel.

Israel's decision will thus depend in part on several critical conditions: gathering high quality intelligence on Iran's nuclear sites and the means used to protect them; building sufficient operational capability; assessing the amount of damage the attack would cause to the sites and the time it would take to rehabilitate them; assessing the Iranian response; and assessing the amount of political damage that Israel would sustain as a result of the attack.² One additional critical consideration, discussed below, concerns the position of the US administration on the military option. Another consideration, perhaps more complex, concerns the nature of the risk Israel will incur if it decides not to attack Iran and accepts the fact of a nuclear capable Iran.

The likely threat that Israel will face from a nuclear Iran is two-pronged. One aspect is the possibility that Iran would attack Israel with nuclear weapons. This is an extremely serious threat that Israel has never had to confront, but there is no satisfactory answer today concerning its probability because there are insufficient indicators to help make a solid assessment of Iran's future conduct once it has nuclear weapons.³ The second aspect pertains to other strategic threats that would stem from Iran's nuclearization. These include a further strengthening of Iran's regional standing and a more aggressive Iranian policy, which would increase the pressure on moderate Arab/Muslim states to accept Iranian positions; harm the Arab-Israeli peace process; damage the regional standing of the United States, which in turn would weaken its allies;

strengthen Iran's deterrent power towards Israel and the United States; increase Hizbollah's freedom of action under the auspices of Iran's stronger standing; create an atmosphere of panic in Israel that would reduce immigration, increase emigration, reduce foreign investments, and all in all injure the Zionist spirit; encourage the possible participation of additional Middle Eastern countries in the nuclear arms race, which would further undermine stability in the region; and possibly promise an Iranian "nuclear umbrella" for Syria and/or Hizbollah against Israel, if they were in serious military distress.

The question is, which of the threats would military action seek to address? If there is sufficient basis to the assessment that Iran is liable to attack Israel with nuclear weapons, then military action can be weighed as a means to prevent an extreme danger on this level. However, if the basic assumption is that Iran would not launch a nuclear strike against Israel but that Israel would be required to confront threats of the second level, it is doubtful they would justify military action and convince other countries of the necessity of the action. Though important and significant threats, they are not existential, and Israel could cope with them. It is true that in the past Israel conducted many military actions and also went to war in order to remove threats that were not necessarily existential. But the problematic nature of military action against Iran and the exceptional risks it involves, as well as the US administration's reservations, raise doubts as to whether it would be correct to take such action, if its entire goal would be to confront the second level threats.

American Considerations

To this day, the US administration has affirmed its commitment to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, and like Israel, does not rule out the military option. However, since 2008 the administration has made it clear that it has reservations about an American military action under the current circumstances. This approach, which mainly reflects the position of the American defense establishment, stems from several serious concerns: the uncertainty about the results and the consequences of a military action; the assessment that an attack on Iran would not completely stop the Iranian nuclear program, but would postpone it for two to three years only, and that after the attack, Iran would improve its protection and defense of its nuclear sites; the possibility that Iran, as the

party attacked, would exploit the attack in order to achieve international legitimacy for the continuation and acceleration of its nuclear program; the disinclination to open another front in Iran, when the United States is already entangled in Iraq and Afghanistan; the fear of a serious crisis in the oil market in the wake of the attack; the fear of an Iranian response against United States targets or those of its allies, especially in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Gulf; the possibility that the action would strengthen the Iranian regime and reduce the chances of changing it from within; and perhaps too the assessment that ultimately it is possible to live with a nuclear Iran, as the Western world coped with the Soviet threat during the Cold War.⁴

Similarly, the US administration has reservations about an Israeli attack on Iran under current circumstances. In July 2009, Vice President Biden stated that Israel is free to act against Iran as it sees fit, and the State Department added that Israel is a sovereign state and the administration does not intend to dictate Israel's moves. However, President Obama quickly and explicitly clarified that the administration has not given a green light to Israel to attack Iran, and senior officials in the defense establishment expressed both reservations about an Israeli attack on Iran and hopes that Israel would not surprise the administration with a military action.

The administration's reservations about an Israeli strike are based on several reasons. Even if in practice the United States is not a partner to an Israeli attack, many people, particularly the Iranians, will assume that the attack is carried out with the knowledge, backing, and participation of the administration. Consequently, Iran is liable to try to strike back at American targets, and for this reason the United States fears that an Israeli action would entangle it in the conflict, whether because Iran would respond by attacking American or American-allied targets, or because the United States would be forced to aid Israel if Israel encountered difficulties. The administration is also liable to suspect that an Israeli attack is intended to draw it into intervening in the conflict and to complete the blow to Iran, for example, if Iran hits back at American targets or at the flow of oil from the Gulf. And above all, the administration fears that an Israeli action would

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cause a shockwave in the Middle East that would do serious damage to American interests in the region, sparking a crisis in the oil market; criticism of the United States in the Arab and Muslim world, which would create difficulties in American efforts to draw closer to the Muslim world; and a strengthening of radical trends in the region, which would also harm the chances of advancing the Arab-Israeli peace process.

The fact that the administration has not ruled out the military option indicates that in principle, it is possible that the administration might change its position and support an American or Israeli military action against Iran. And yet, the change will not take place under current circumstances because the administration is still giving a chance, however slim it appears, to the sanctions. But if it becomes clear to the administration that the sanctions do not have a sufficient effect and Iran continues in its quest for nuclear weapons, it will have to choose between two difficult options. One is to accept its inability to stop the Iranian nuclear program — meaning Iran will achieve the ability to produce nuclear weapons or will actually produce the weapons — and to prepare to deter Iran from using nuclear weapons and stop its rising power. The other option is to stop the Iranian nuclear program through military action. In effect, the administration will need to decide which risk is greater: the risk of a military action, or the risk resulting from a nuclear Iran.⁵

Under current circumstances, the likelihood that the administration would support an American or Israeli military action against Iran is not great, and not only because it is waiting for the effect of the sanctions to play itself out. As long as the American defense establishment continues to harbor reservations, the administration will be hard pressed to oppose the defense establishment's position and order an attack. Some of the defense establishment's reservations about a military action will not change in the coming years, and the administration will need to take them into account in the future as well. However, there are several conditions that could change the administration's balance of considerations.

- a. A clear step by Iran that would leave no doubt that it is close to obtaining nuclear weapons and is adamant about producing them, so that only military action could block their production.
- b. Increasing support in American public opinion for military action against Iran. Surveys taken in the United States in recent years show

that most of the American public sees Iran as a threat and an enemy, and that more than half of the respondents support military action against Iran if diplomacy and sanctions do not halt Iran's progress towards nuclear weapons.⁶ Furthermore, in recent months additional former members of the political and security establishment, among them former CIA director general Michael Hayden, have come out in support of military action against Iran if the diplomatic option fails. An open question is to what extent the strengthening of the Republican Party in Congress will affect the amount of support for military action.

- c. The departure of most of the American forces from Iraq, and perhaps from Afghanistan, which will reduce, although not entirely eliminate, their vulnerability to Iranian efforts at attack and sabotage. Furthermore, if the American administration withdraws its forces from Iraq and Afghanistan under the aura of failure, defeat, and the strengthening of Iran's influence in Iraq, it is possible that this will encourage the administration to balance this failure with a military strike against nuclear sites in Iran.
- d. If the administration weighs military action in Iran, it will need international support, and possibly also backup from the UN Security Council. Little such support exists today. On the contrary, there is widespread public international resistance to the action. But if the administration attempts to build such support, the picture might look different. Isolated signs of support for military action have begun to emerge, like statements by former British prime minister Tony Blair in September 2010 that he does not rule out military action in Iran.

Even more important are the revelations in the WikiLeaks documents that very senior officials in Jordan and the Gulf states (the UAE, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain), and first and foremost King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, have urged the US administration since 2005 to take military action if Iran's nuclear

program cannot be stopped with diplomatic means. According to these documents, Qatar even expressed willingness to allow the United States to use a base on its territory to attack Iran. The actual support of the Gulf

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states for military action at the moment of truth is questionable, and the embarrassment they suffered as a result of the leaks led them quickly to announce publicly that they support a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear problem. Nonetheless, one cannot ignore the fact that several Arab leaders have secretly pressured the US administration to use the military option in the absence of an alternative.

These revelations are quite significant, and illustrate that stopping Iran, even using military means, is not only Israel's issue. Furthermore, they show potential for garnering support and legitimacy for military action if the administration eyes it positively. The revelations also show that these Arab leaders, at least privately, acknowledge that the Iranian threat is a major issue in and of itself, and is not connected to an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. Furthermore, if it was important that Israel not be seen as the one pushing the administration to attack Iran, the WikiLeaks revelations have made it clear that Israel is not alone in putting pressure on the administration. This places Israel in a different position and makes it easier for it to press the administration to consider the military option when it is evident that the diplomatic option has failed.

For the administration, the position of those Arab leaders is problematic. It is not only Israel that is seeking to place the military option on the table in a practical way, but several of the most important American allies in the Arab world, with the Gulf states prepared to incur the risk that Iran will retaliate against them in the wake of an attack. Qatar is even prepared to be involved in the action, despite an explicit public warning by Iran that it will retaliate against countries that assist in an action against it. If the administration neither attacks nor succeeds in stopping Iran, this can be expected to harm its credibility in the eyes of the Arab states, and it will face the danger that the Gulf states will fall more into line with Iran from a lack of choice, with Egypt signaling explicitly that it too is liable to go the nuclear route. However, although since 2005 Arab leaders have expressed support for military action, thus far this has not been enough to counter the administration's reservations.

The administration is likely to reach the decision point during 2011-2012, once several factors are clearer: the extent of the influence of the sanctions on Iran; the chance (small) of reaching a diplomatic agreement with Iran on uranium enrichment, which will guard against Iran's continued working toward nuclear weapons; the Iranian policy on the

question of breaking out toward nuclear weapons; the deployment of American forces in the Gulf region; and perhaps also changes in the domestic situation in Iran.

Israel and the American Considerations

The American position regarding the military option was always a major consideration for Israel. Yet until the end of the Bush administration, the main question from Israel's perspective was would the United States, with its superior operational capabilities, attack Iran, thereby freeing Israel of this issue. With the US administration thus far not leaning toward launching a military action in Iran, the current urgent question is: will the US give Israel a green light to act against Iran?

Despite the opposition among many countries to Iran's nuclear program, Israel has not succeeded in convincing other governments, the US included, of the necessity of military action if the diplomatic effort fails. Some of the difficulty in convincing other governments of this necessity stems from their understanding of the meaning of the threat. The more that other governments, led by the US administration, are convinced that there is a not-insignificant danger that Iran will attack Israel with nuclear weapons, the more they are liable to give legitimacy to Israeli military action.

However, the common assumption in the world today is that Iran will not carry out a nuclear attack against Israel, and that ultimately there will be mutual nuclear deterrence if Iran obtains nuclear weapons, as occurred in Europe during the Cold War. The other dangers that a nuclear Iran arouses are not in the realm of existential threats and therefore do not justify a risky military move. Indeed, claims were made in the United States that the fear of an Israeli brain drain in the wake of an Iranian threat is not a reason for military action against Iran. It was also argued that since Israel has military superiority over Iran in all categories, including the nuclear realm, the Iranian nuclear threat is not a sufficient reason for a war with Iran.⁷

Can Israel attack Iran without a green light from the US? Some in Israel claim that on an issue as critical as the Iranian nuclear threat, which might seal the fate of the State of Israel, the government of Israel does not need the approval of the US administration, and it must assume responsibility for its security. Others believe that Israel cannot afford a

serious crisis in relations with the United States as a result of military action against Iran that is contrary to the position of the administration, not to mention the fact that coordination with the United States is liable to be necessary, with the Gulf region and Iraq serving as a theater of operations for US forces.

Ultimately it appears that Israel will not be able to take military action against Iran without a green light from the US administration, or at least a yellow light, whereby the administration would not take a positive or negative stance and would leave the decision in Israel's hands. It is hard to imagine the government of Israel deciding to act against Iran if the US president says explicitly that the administration is opposed to such an action, and that it would harm United States essential interests.

If Israel decides to attack Iran without an American green light, it could pursue one of two tactical courses. One is to inform the US before the action of its intention to attack, thereby avoiding a surprise for the administration and reducing the danger of uncoordinated clashes with American forces in the Gulf region, but risking a refusal and US pressure not to attack. The other way is not to inform the administration and afterwards deal with the charge that Israel did not inform and in fact surprised its most important ally that it was about to undertake such a critical action. Ultimately, the difference between the two paths is not substantial, because even if the administration is not informed, it will be clear that it was against the attack.

In any case, an Israeli attack on Iran that opposes the administration's position will likely lead to a very serious crisis in Israel's relations with the United States. Israel will be accused of harming the most important interests of the United States in the Middle East, and the criticism will come not only from the administration but also from Congress and the media. The action will damage future cooperation between the two countries on the Iranian issue, and because one attack will apparently not be enough to stop the Iranian nuclear program completely and Israel will need the United States to continue confronting the issue, this factor is significant. Since the administration in any case has no promising means of dealing with Iran, Israel will be held responsible for both the failed handling of Iran and Iran's legitimacy to renew and accelerate its nuclear program. The administration is also liable to exploit the criticism of Israel in order to pressure Israel on the Palestinian issue. But most important,

the relations of trust between the two governments will be harmed, and the administration may consequently place limitations on security cooperation with Israel.

Two possible factors might reduce the damage caused by Israeli military action. One would be provocative Iranian conduct prior to the attack, such as the disclosure of secret critical nuclear sites, the exposure of an advanced nuclear weapons program, or Iran's departure from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which would leave no room for doubt that Iran is breaking out towards nuclear weapons, in conjunction with the diplomatic effort reaching a clear dead end. Such conduct would have an especially important effect if it increased support in American public opinion and in Congress for military action. The other factor, and the most important one, would be the operational success of the action, and the recognition after the fact that the damages are not as severe as initial assessments had predicted. Ultimately, the United States and many other countries very much want to stop the Iranian nuclear program. In this case, even if Israel is criticized and steps are taken against it in the wake of the action, they will be short term, and ultimately the attack may even be praised – as with the attack on the Iraqi reactor in 1981.

Conclusion

Under current circumstances, the diplomatic conditions are still not ripe for a military attack on Iran. Almost all governments concerned have reservations about the move; the US administration has not ruled it out in principle, but in practice it has evinced major reluctance, and Israel will have a hard time carrying it out without a green light from the United States and favorable related conditions.

The key to an attack on Iran, either American or Israeli, is in the hands of the United States. At this stage, the administration does not have to decide, because it still has a window of opportunity and it continues to try to exhaust the sanctions and diplomatic option. In order for the US administration to consider the military

The WikiLeaks revelations have made it clear that Israel is not alone in putting pressure on the administration.

option positively, a change is needed in its assessment of the balance of opportunities and risks, and the amount of domestic and international support for it. At this point the likelihood that the administration will

change its position appears slim, but it is liable to increase if it becomes clearer that the sanctions are not effective, that Iran is close to the ability to build nuclear weapons, and that there is increased support in and outside the United States for military action against Iran.

Notes

- 1 Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Point of No Return," *The Atlantic*, September 2010; "Israel, Iran and the Bomb," *The Atlantic*, September 2010; Flynt and Hillary Leverett, "The Weak Case for War with Iran," *Foreign Policy*, August 11, 2010; Steven Simon and Ray Takeyh, "If Iran Came Close to Getting a Nuclear Weapon, Would Obama Use Force?" *Washington Post*, August 1, 2010.
- 2 See an expanded discussion of this issue in Ephraim Kam, *A Nuclear Iran: What Does it Mean, and What Can be Done*, Memorandum No. 88, Institute for National Security Studies, 2007, pp. 32-41.
- 3 Ibid., pp. 49-55.
- 4 See, for example, Glenn Kessler, "Sanctions Split Iranian Leaders, Gates Says," *Washington Post*, November 11, 2010.
- 5 See also on this issue Ephraim Kam, "The Iranian Nuclear Issue: The US Options," *Strategic Assessment* 13, no. 2 (2010): 59-62.
- 6 Eytan Gilboa, "American Public Opinion toward Iran's Nuclear Program: Moving Towards Confrontation," *BESA Perspective*, No. 117, October 24, 2010.
- 7 Bruce Reidel, "We Don't Need Another Middle East War," *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 22, 2010.