

Facing the Iranian Challenge: The Israeli Options

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There are two underlying assumptions on a possible Israeli military operation against Iran. One is that we cannot exercise a military operation as long as some kind of a true dialogue exists between the United States and Iran, whether it is direct or indirect, and as long as the diplomatic avenue is such that it stands certain chances of success. The second assumption is that Israel will not be able to carry out a military operation against Iran even if the diplomatic negotiations fail without some support from the United States. This is true at the operative level and also at the strategic level. At the operative level, as long as the United States is in Iraq and in the Gulf countries, any Israeli military operation against Iran needs coordination with the United States. At the strategic level, Israel cannot take such critical action without support of the US.

A military capability to strike Iran depends upon four variables. First is the level of intelligence: to what extent do you really know where are the objectives you want to strike. As Donald Rumsfeld once said, you know what you know and you don't know what you don't know. Iran is not in Gaza or Ramallah, so if the Israeli intelligence is not good enough there is a good chance that you don't know. And if you don't know a lot, then the risk of launching such an attack is much greater.

The second component in the military capability is the ability to send enough planes that can cross the long distance, penetrate the Iranian air defenses, and have an efficient strike capability against targets that intelligence provides. This question is not only a technical question of how many planes can fly such a distance, rather relates to comprehensive issues

such as: can it be done without cooperation with countries that are situated on the way? To what extent can you cope with the Iranian air defenses? Within this capability, which depends on a critical mass of planes, the question is, how long can you sustain it? Does it have to be one go, as was the case in Iraq, or must it be done over a longer period of time?

A third variable is how to cause enough damage in the strike. There are many unknowns. There is much improvement on the Israeli side to develop better, more efficient bombs. But by the same token the Iranians are developing their own weapons to better defend themselves. We have to try and assess the damage that would be inflicted, the critical mass, and the right objective.

The fourth element builds on the previous three. If we succeeded in having better intelligence and choosing the right targets, and if our planes reached their destination with bombs that can penetrate and cause damage, what effect will there be? The Iranian capability does not depend only on existing facilities but also on know-how that exists in computers, sometimes replicated in other places, and in the minds of researchers. Thus there is a question of whether the damage you want to inflict is truly significant. And this leads us to the next point, namely, the objective of such an operation.

We can point out what an Israeli operation cannot achieve, specifically, two situations. First, it cannot vanquish or triumph over Iran. Israel cannot exact such a price from Iran that Iran would say, we yield, we capitulate, we are suspending our nuclear program, and we will do whatever you desire. Second, there is unfortunately no Israeli military capability to reach a situation whereby the Iranian nuclear capability is destroyed so that it can not be resumed. The million dollar question thus is how long the suspension would last, several months or several years.

What are the risks of such a military operation? An Israeli military operation holds many risks. The first and obvious risk is that the operation would fail. If you carry out a military operation that fails, you pay three times. You undermined your deterrence, you are perceived as the aggressor, and you help Tehran prove to the world that Israel is the problem and not Iran.

Second, an Israeli strike against Iran will be followed by Iranian retaliation. It is quite certain that Hizbollah would engage in a war with Israel, and this could also carry over to the Palestinians. In other words, an

Israeli operation in Iran whose purpose is limited would potentially lead to a broader confrontation.

The influence of a direct Iranian response might hurt Israel less than other players in the region, chiefly the Americans and their interests in the Persian Gulf. Of course a major Iranian response would also affect Israel, especially if this causes damage to world stability. Israel would be blamed that it created a situation that plagues so many international players. In addition, a military operation against Iran would mean a conflict with the Iranian people, which doesn't exist today. And obviously an Israeli direct military operation against Iran would lead to an unsettled score, even if there is a new regime, and we cannot be sure that we will be able to mend fences.

There are advantages, disadvantages, and risks both in not taking action and allowing Iran to become a nuclear power and in launching a military operation.

There is a window of opportunity and we have not only two clocks but three clocks. Obviously we need to find the convergence of those three clocks. The first clock is the military clock. Israel improves its own capabilities on the one hand and Iran is improving its capabilities on the other hand. There are situations where there is a military window of opportunity that is larger, and sometimes this window closes. For example, if the missiles that Iran is supposed to receive from Russia, the SA-300 batteries, the most advanced anti-aircraft missiles, become operational, there is no question that in an operative manner this reduces Israel's capability to strike.

The second clock is the strategic clock that involves not only the status of the negotiations between the United States and Iran, but also other variables. We talked about US-Russian relations, the situation in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, the US standing in the region, and many other components. And the third clock is the technological element that says when Iran not only has the technology but has also manufactured enough devices, and even more so, has dispersed them.

To find the optimal time is a problem because of these three clocks. We might say that this optimum, as far as the relevant window of opportunity is concerned, is due not before next summer, because until then there may be a diplomatic process with a new administration, and until then or during

that period it is not too late with regard to the other clocks. But this window cannot exist for a long term either, and therefore the time to examine such an opportunity is from 2010, and I would say up to the summer of 2011. This is more or less the time frame where a military operation might be taken into consideration.

Israel has to prepare its military option. It is the right thing to do because the military must be ready, even for things whose probability is low, and even for things that hopefully you won't have to use.

The second issue is that Israel will have to achieve some sort of a dialogue with the United States. First of all, it must be a dialogue that will involve what direction the United States is taking with Iran, what might a possible deal between the US and Iran look like, and what it means for Israel. And it is not necessarily a situation of total cessation by Iran of their nuclear plan, like in Libya.

Of course the most problematic and sensitive scenario is that one day there might be a situation in which Israel will feel it has to deal with Iran, and there should be a very discreet dialogue that discusses the question of whether Israel has an option to act militarily. Also, the American Congress and the American president will have to decide what guarantees can be given so that Iran dare not attack Israel. Israel might agree to such guarantees because other options will either be blocked or be much worse.