

Deliberating a Military Option against Iran

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For a military option to be adopted against the Iranian nuclear program, four different questions demand clear answers. The first concerns the scenario: what scenario will we be living in, especially in 2010? The second deals with the result of a strategic situation assessment, which weighs the risk of living with an Iranian bomb against the risk of trying to prevent Iran from acquiring the bomb. Third, what will the American policy towards Iran be? And the fourth is the purely military issue. I will attempt to focus primarily on the latter point.

First, what will 2010 look like? In October 2009 negotiations were launched between the United States and Iran. These negotiations could lead to one of the following four scenarios in the coming year.

Agreement: The chances of this scenario occurring seem low, but American goodwill and the support of the international community for engagement could result in an agreement. To be sure, an agreement can be either a good one or a very bad one from Israel's perspective. Either way, however, if there is an agreement between Iran and the international community that seems to resolve the Iranian nuclear issue, clearly an Israeli military operation could not be considered.

Crisis: By this I mean not just the withdrawal from negotiations by one of the sides or both of them, rather a crisis that indicates it is the end of the road. Should a crisis lead to the international community rallying around the United States during an international campaign to isolate Iran politically and economically, an Israeli military operation cannot be considered.

Non-crisis, non-settlement, that is, negotiations that go on and on with ups and downs: Obviously from the Iranian point of view, ongoing negotiations are good, because Iran in the meanwhile continues to enrich

uranium. But the American president also does not want to reach a crisis. He just received the Nobel Peace Prize and a crisis, carrying with it the potential of a conflict, is the last thing he wants. Therefore, the third scenario is the continuation of the negotiations, with all their ups and downs, which also would not provide Israel with favorable terms for a military operation.

The fourth scenario is the only one that offers any substantial possibility for an Israeli military operation: if there is a crisis in which – unlike the second scenario – the United States fails to create a stable coalition, sanctions are not implemented, and in addition, there is the sense that no one really intends to solve the Iranian problem or is capable of doing so. Such a situation, with each man for himself – perhaps also Israel only for itself – gives much greater freedom of action. That summarizes the scenarios.

The second issue touches on a strategic situation assessment that weighs the comparative risks and rewards of two problematic situations: if all else truly fails and Iran stands at the threshold of a bomb or even has a bomb already and Israel must adjust to living in such a reality, versus the need to understand the risks in trying to remove this threat by an Israeli military operation and the implications of a military operation.

The third element is perhaps the most dramatic: Israel's capability of providing an answer to the question, can it undertake a military operation even in opposition to the American stance? If we are talking about the American sphere of interest it is reasonable to think we would not be prepared to do so, precisely at a point when American aid, whether political or military aid, becomes more critical than ever before. As far as the American position is concerned, it seems that both at the American political echelon and in the military there are reservations regarding a military operation against Iran. Two CENTCOM commanders, one retired and one current, have explained to me why an Israeli military operation is risky. According to them, if anyone is to go the military route, it is preferable that it be the United States because it has better capabilities and in any case would be the one who would pay the price.

We come now to the fourth issue. Let us assume that Israel has legitimacy for a military operation and that following the risk assessment the Israeli government concludes that it would be more dangerous to live with Iranian nuclear potential than to assume the risk of a military operation. In such

a situation the military echelon would be required to give the political echelon satisfactory answers to the following five questions. Only if the answers are adequate would it be possible to decide on carrying out such an operation.

The first question is one of intelligence. Do we know what we need to know? Do we know the targets, the obstacles, the problems? Do we know enough? There may be an important target but we are uncertain if there aren't five or ten other targets of the same type. In that case it may not make much sense to attack the one target. Therefore the first question is one of intelligence. Relatively speaking, it is an easier question to answer than the others.

The second question relates to the capability of bringing a critical mass to the targets about which we have good intelligence. Assuming the attack is carried out by the air force, can we get enough sorties off the ground to those targets for the required amount of time? This is not a simple question because we are also talking about great distances. Furthermore, it would be necessary to fly through the air space of certain states that would almost certainly not be cooperative. We are talking about the capability of reaching these targets and attacking them with a critical mass of airplanes. This is a purely operational question, from aerial refueling to many other issues.

The third question relates to the amount of physical damage such bombings could inflict. Would the damage be significant? This is a central question. Yet even if the physical damage Israel can inflict is significant enough, the fourth question, which to an extent also summarizes the previous three, arises: and then what? That is to say, what would the effect be on Iran's nuclear capability? Because if a very large part of the knowledge exists, whether in the minds of their scientists or in their computers and there is redundancy in their capabilities, from a technical point of view it takes very little time to rebuild. So perhaps it does not make sense to go to all that trouble. On the other hand, if it is estimated that reconstruction would take a significantly long time, it may well be much more worthwhile. Therefore it is necessary to define whether we are talking about the destruction of the Iranian nuclear capability or preventing the Iranians from attacking us with nuclear weapons. How long a delay could we hope to cause? Would it be measured in months or in years? How many?

Having arrived at reasonable answers to the fourth question as well, we now face the fifth: the operational window of opportunity. It is true that we are constantly working to improve our capabilities: better planes, weapons, and intelligence. But the Iranians too are doing all they can in terms of placing much of their equipment in underground tunnels, hiding it, creating redundancy wherever necessary, and of course, improving their aerial defenses. It is no secret that Iran is seeking to buy advanced anti-aircraft systems from Russia. Fortunately, at least for now, they have failed to do so. But it is absolutely clear that Israel would prefer to attack before any such systems became operational.

Assuming all the answers are positive, we would also need two additional components. One is political: politically speaking, is an Israeli government capable of making a decision? We are talking about an issue that is apolitical in nature, and in this sense the political system has greater latitude for action.

The second point is early preparation. It is difficult to make decisions on such far reaching, fateful questions without preparation. I am not talking about military preparations, rather drilling the process of dialogue between the political and military echelons. This is not a pinpoint operation such as the one carried out in Iraq in 1981 or the one attributed to Israel in September 2007 in Syria, but something on a totally different scale requiring simulations and constant joint situation assessments by the military and the political levels.

Israel is liable to find itself having to choose between two bad choices: foregoing a military operation and living with an Iranian bomb, or taking the initiative and attacking despite the potential risks. This theoretical question might turn into an all too practical one in 2010.