

Confronting the Non-Existential Iranian Threat

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A nuclear bomb in Iran does not represent an existential threat to Israel. First, the likelihood that it would be used against us is close to nil. Anyone who has followed the Iranian regime knows that it behaves rationally, and it wouldn't dare attack Israel with a nuclear missile, given that in its mind Israel is armed to the gills with nuclear weapons.

However, for the sake of debate, let us assume that Iran is about to drop the bomb on us. Even that does not represent an existential threat to the State of Israel. A bomb of the type Iran is trying to construct, with a yield of approximately 20 kiloton, has a damage radius of some 600 m. When you calculate how many people fit into such a radius in a city as crowded as Tel Aviv, you get about 20,000 fatal casualties. While this is not a small number, it is also not a threat to Israel's existence.

Rather, the Iranian nuclear threat is an intolerable threat. It is intolerable because it would encourage proliferation in the Middle East. And when there are many nuclear actors, mutual deterrence wanes and someone is liable in the end to make a mistake and use this weapon, even though this is an irrational decision. Even rational regimes make errors and take foolish decisions.

Moreover, the Middle East is the fatherland and incubator for most of the world's terrorist organizations. In a nuclear Middle East it is only a matter of time for some terrorist organization to get its hands on the bomb. What I have said in terms of deterrence between Iran and Israel does not hold true for a terrorist organization that has no fixed address and doesn't care what Israel would do in response. And we would have absolutely no answer. Therefore this threat is intolerable and we have to do everything in our power to make sure it does not come to pass.

What can be done to make sure it doesn't happen? First, the Iranian regime is much more pressure-prone than people seem to think. We praise their ability to gain time, and we are worried that they are right in their assessment that the West is too weak (morally) and too divided to stop them. However, since the beginning of the twentieth century, tens of millions of people have died after falling into the same illusion, underestimating the will of the Western world, especially the United States. They didn't know when to stop and didn't understand that once a certain line is crossed they have to pay the price. From World War I to Iraq and Afghanistan, America has missed almost no opportunity to use its force against whoever deserved it. Many nations counted on the West wanting only peace and not having the stomach for fighting. This is true only up to a point.

The Iranians too are doing everything they can in order to gain more and more time. Given the amount of low-rate enriched uranium that they already possess, Iran can build one bomb in a relatively short period of time – about six months – if it expels the inspectors and begins to enrich to a high level of enrichment. But there is an important reservation here: they would be able to do it on condition that during those six months no one bombs its centrifuges, or nuclear storage and other nuclear facilities. This, however, is unlikely. The Iranians understand this very well and therefore they aren't choosing this path. They will not attempt to enrich HEU before they have amassed enough material for a number of bombs on the assumption that someone will try to impede their progress.

This makes our challenge even more difficult, because they don't cross a certain line that will enable us to convince the world to impose diplomatic and economic sanctions and, if there is no other choice, to use the military option too.

No one in the world wants Iran to have the bomb, not even Russia or China. But every nation has its own considerations. One wants something from the Americans in return and the other one depends on Iranian oil. However, as the clock keeps ticking and Iranian capabilities grow, the world is coming together against Iran because it is closing in on its goal. This is something we must take advantage of.

The path the Americans are treading today has a good chance of succeeding, i.e., imposing sanctions on the Iranians so that they will accept an agreement that in the end will insure they do not have the capability of

making a bomb on their own. However, is that going to erase the capability from Iran? Will that get what they know out of their heads? No. The name of the game is time. It is impossible to erase knowledge.

However even a postponement of several years is significant. It is no secret that the Iranian public isn't satisfied with its government because, among other reasons, the choices the Iranian regime has made do not exactly improve the welfare of the citizens. When you have a few years of breathing room, regime change can also occur. Were there an accountable, moderate regime in Iran we'd be sleeping better at night.

My sense is that the policy led today by the United States is positive. At its core is the attempt to work towards the best interests of the rest of the coalition members. This is the context for the cancellation of the plan to position anti-ballistic interceptors in East Europe, and to find other oil suppliers for China. This will lead to sanctions closing in on Iran. I do not think that the Iranians will be able to withstand these sanctions easily. So the chance that we have to reach the military option is not great, but should it come to that, then the questions raised by Maj. Gen. (ret.) Giora Eiland on the military option would be answered in the affirmative.

What will happen if the military option is taken? Even if we gain some years, what happens during those years? If during that time the world does not rally together to stop the Iranians using every means, we will face the same problem all over again three years hence. This cannot go on forever. We have to get to a point of global recognition that will not allow the development of a nuclear capability in Iran. If there is a chance that we can reach such a point, we have to get there now. To my mind, this is the most fundamental question, not the question of capability of a military option. Of course in terms of capabilities, the Americans have superior resources, especially when we're talking about ongoing, sustained efforts.

Time and again the Iranians have said that no one will dare attack them. Why do they think that no one will dare attack them? Because they can strike back, and they can do that mainly at Israel. Indeed, we had better believe them. No matter who attacks, we will be targeted. How precisely? What can the Iranians do to us? We're not going to see any Iranian tanks here. We will first see Shehab-3 surface-to-surface missiles. Then they will use Hizbollah; this is precisely why they have invested in Hizbollah. They aren't investing in Hizbollah in order to encourage the resistance and

destroy the State of Israel. One of the primary reasons for their investment in Hizbollah is to deter us from attacking their nuclear facilities in Iran.

If we have learned anything from the Second Lebanon War it is that we must not allow such a war to go on for too long. Israel has the capability of doing much to shorten the duration of a war against Lebanon and Hizbollah, both directly and indirectly. Therefore, the number of rockets that Hizbollah might fire on us will, in my estimation, not be very different from what we experienced in the Second Lebanon War. I won't stand here and tell you that that was easy, but it certainly wasn't as bad as a nuclear threat.