

Also in this Issue

The Unilateral Withdrawal: A
Security Error of Historical
Magnitude
Yaakov Amidror



Economic Ramifications of the
Disengagement Plan
Imri Tov



Preventing the Proliferation of
Biological Weapons:
Situation Overview and
Recommendations for Israel
David Friedman



Israel's Defense Industry in the
21st Century: Challenges and
Opportunities
Sharon Sadeh

Curbing the Iranian Nuclear Threat: The Military Option

Ephraim Kam

The Suspension Agreement

To date the crisis regarding the Iranian nuclear issue has been postponed, at least temporarily. Prior to November 2004 Iran was subject to considerable European pressure regarding its nuclear program, backed by a threat to send the matter to the Security Council, which would have to decide whether or not to impose sanctions on Iran for the violation of its commitments to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). As a result of this pressure Iran was forced to retract its public decision of May 2004 to continue uranium enrichment, a decision that undermined a previous commitment to the European governments to suspend these activities.

The recent change in the Iranian position led to the signing on November 14, 2004 of a new agreement between Iran and leading representatives of the European Union, in which Iran renewed its commitment to suspend all activities related to the enrichment of uranium and the separation of plutonium. According to the agreement the suspension will remain in force for the duration of the talks, scheduled to begin in December 2004 between the European governments and Iran regarding a long term agreement. The long term agreement is intended to ensure that Iran's nuclear program will be used for peaceful purposes only. It will also include agreements regarding other nuclear matters and related tech-

Editor's Note

After Arafat

Despite the widespread perception that the end of the Arafat era in Palestinian politics creates some potential opportunity for a revival of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Yasir Arafat's departure from the scene in mid-November 2004 actually plunges the Palestinians and the rest of the region into a period of even greater uncertainty.

There is little basis on which to project likely future developments. It is true that the appointment of successors to the three main offices Arafat held – head of the Palestinian Authority, head of the PLO, and head of Fatah – proceeded fairly smoothly, and that new PA presidential elections have been scheduled for early January 2005. However, Palestinian political institutions and constitutional arrangements have not yet been put to a real test. Indeed, it is not even clear whether they will be of any relevance at all or whether – as some fear – matters will be decided in an extra-constitutional power struggle among

those with independent power bases or, perhaps even worse, not decided at all.

The most important unknown remains whether Arafat's successors will be willing and/or able to implement changes in governance and policy – the rationalization of the structure of Palestinian security forces, the confiscation of unauthorized weapons, and the suppression of hostile incitement in the media and the educational system – that Arafat himself was unwilling and/or unable to make as long as he held the reins of power.

Israel is obviously interested in the empowerment of a Palestinian leadership committed to the end of violence and the resumption of peace negotiations, but it is less clear what, if anything, Israel or others can contribute to the consolidation of such a leadership. On the one hand, actions that appear to reward Palestinian advocates of a less confrontational approach could enhance their authority and legitimacy in the contest with

those bent on carrying on the intifada of the past four years. On the other hand, Palestinian advocates of reform and an end to violence are already vulnerable to accusations of collaboration, and anything Israel or others might say or do could easily be portrayed as interference on behalf of favored candidates or “puppets,” thereby further eroding their authority and legitimacy.

It will be difficult, in the best of circumstances, for Israel to reinforce and encourage those it might prefer to see in power without exposing itself and them to charges of unwarranted interference in Palestinian affairs in order to “subvert” the “will of the people.” That dilemma may well impel the government of Israel to maintain a studied hands-off approach and to continue with its own plans for unilateral disengagement from Gaza, while exploring any opportunities that emerge for coordination with a new Palestinian leadership and other regional and international actors.

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Curbing the Iranian Nuclear Threat – cont.

nological and economic cooperation, as well as security issues.

The agreement signed is of considerable significance, at least in the short term. It indicates that Iran is sensitive to the international pressure applied to it, particularly when it encounters a united front poised against it, and it attaches importance to avoiding diplomatic isolation and the imposition of economic sanctions. Furthermore, the suspension of Iran's suspected nuclear activities, even for a few months, might effect additional postponement of its efforts to achieve nuclear weapons.

Nevertheless it is important to consider that the suspension will be temporary only, and that sooner or later Iran will almost certainly recommence its activities regarding the enrichment of uranium and/or the production of plutonium. There are several reasons for this assumption:

- The agreement is about temporariness: it calls for suspension, not termination, of the activities. Iran has explicitly presented its agreement to suspension as an expression of its good will, rather than as a legal commitment or because of an obligation related to the NPT. Iran has also hinted that in practice the suspension will last about six months.

- Although the agreement does not explicitly limit the period of suspension, it specifies that it will be linked to the duration of the talks between Iran and the European governments aimed at achieving a long term agreement. These talks are expected to raise issues that will be difficult to resolve, such as the supply of a light

water research reactor and nuclear fuel to Iran. This means that if the talks run into a dead end or are halted, Iran will feel free to renew the suspended nuclear activities.

- Iran had already – in October 2003 – made a commitment to the European governments, to suspend its nuclear activities. However, half a year later it announced that it was re-

A nuclear capability would strengthen Iran's status as the mainstay of radical elements inside and outside the region.

newing these activities because the Europeans had not honored their promise to supply it with nuclear technology and remove the Iranian nuclear issue from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) agenda.

It may therefore be presumed that the new suspension agreement does not reflect a strategic decision by Iran to cancel its nuclear weapons ambitions, rather is a tactical move on Iran's part intended to resist the heavy pressure it has recently experienced, and drive a wedge between the European governments and the American administration. If so, the crisis regarding the Iranian nuclear issue is liable

to re-emerge in the not too distant future. It is reasonable to assume that as long as it is confirmed that Iran is suspending its suspected nuclear activities, the matter will not be brought to the Security Council, and certainly sanctions or military steps will not be taken against it. If Iran once again enriches uranium, overtly or covertly, the US will renew its demand to bring the matter to the Security Council, with the intention of imposing sanctions. Yet the outcome of this scenario is unclear: while the European governments have threatened that if Iran does not agree to suspension they would support Security Council intervention, even if this happens a Security Council majority, necessary for the imposition of sanctions on Iran, is not guaranteed.

Should diplomatic pressure fail, the US is liable to consider seriously the possibility of taking military steps in order to halt the Iranian nuclear program. The US has in fact dropped hints in this direction. American leaders have announced in recent months that the administration is committed to preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, and that it is currently focusing on a diplomatic move, aimed at halting the Iranian nuclear program, while not ruling out other options. Neither has the administration concealed the military exercises and war games related to a military operation in Iran. Even after the agreement was reached in November 2004, senior officials declared that they do not view it as a strategic change in the Iranian approach, and announced that Iran had accelerated its uranium en-

richment activities prior to signing the agreement and was engaged in the development of nuclear warheads for its ballistic missiles.

A military option may also be considered in Israel, and remarks in this vein are more explicit in Israel than in the US. Prominent figures in the Israeli government and in the defense establishment have announced in recent months that they are waiting to see the results of the international pressure applied to Iran, but that if these prove insufficient Israel will have to rely on itself and take its own steps in its defense.

Against this background, it is important to evaluate the array of chances and risks related to an Israeli military operation against Iranian nuclear sites, and the considerations that should guide Israel in this matter.

Iran and Nuclear Weapons: The Significance for Israel

Since the beginning of the 1990s Israeli leaders have assigned the Iranian threat a greater degree of importance. This is not only because of the Iranian regime's exceeding hostility toward Israel and Iran's increasing involvement in terrorism directed at Israel, but mainly because of Iran's clear and advancing efforts to acquire nuclear weapons. Many Israeli leaders regard the Iranian threat as the gravest strategic threat facing Israel, and some regard it as liable to endanger Israel's very existence in the future. At the root of this concern lies the fear that the likely acquisition of nuclear weap-

ons by the fundamentalist regime in Tehran, which calls explicitly for the destruction of the State of Israel, may result in the attempt to use these weapons against Israel.

Iran's possession of nuclear weapons is of major significance to Israel: a new situation would arise whereby for the first time since Israel's establishment an enemy state has capability of fatally wounding it. However, it is doubtful whether the Iranian regime would actually exercise a nuclear capability against Israel, despite its basic approach that rejects Israel's existence. Three reasons may alleviate the gravity of this threat.

The first reason is that, as far as can be judged, Iran's basic motive for aspiring to nuclear weapons capability is defensive-deterrent in nature. It seems that Iran decided from the first to develop a military nuclear capability as a counterweight to Iraq's capabilities regarding weapons of mass destruction, in particular against the background of the heavy blow sustained in the war against Iraq. At a later stage and in parallel to Iraq's weakening since the Gulf War, the Iranian regime's attempts to acquire nuclear weapons have been motivated by the increasing need it perceived to deter the US and, to a lesser extent, Israel, from directing their strategic capabilities against it. In the meantime there is no reason to assume that any exigency has undermined the primacy of the defensive-deterrent motivation to Iran. The Iranian Islamic regime, in contrast to Saddam Hussein's regime, has until now not displayed tendencies toward risky,

adventurous moves. The possibility exists that if and when Iran acquires nuclear weapons its order of priorities may change, and it may attach greater importance to a possible attack on Israel. Nevertheless, it may be assumed that as in the case of other countries that acquired nuclear weapons, Iran will regard this weaponry as a last card that may and should be played only when an extreme and immediate strategic risk exists. Iran apparently does not regard Israel as a country presenting such a threat, and its desire to destroy Israel is not an overriding interest justifying the use of nuclear weapons.

The second reason is American deterrence. Iran is well aware of its military weakness relative to that of the US, and the last scenario that it wants is a military confrontation between them. Iran is also aware of the strategic links between the US and Israel and knows of the American administration's commitment to Israel's security. Iran must therefore assume that a nuclear attack against Israel would result in very serious American retaliation, particularly if the US administration makes this clear in advance. Furthermore, Israel is regarded by Iran as a strong regional power possessing a large nuclear arsenal and therefore has a certain deterrent ability of its own toward Iran. Israel's capability of intercepting a nuclear tipped missile using the Arrow system and its second strike retaliatory capability in response to an Iranian attempt at a nuclear attack may be of significance to the Iranians, and this consideration may well lead

in the end to a balance of terror and mutual nuclear deterrence.

The third reason concerns the long term. In the last decade Iran has undergone a significant internal change resulting from a widespread demand, mainly among the younger generation, for extension of domestic personal and political freedom. This change is taking place slowly, with ups and downs, and in the last two years the strength of the proponents of change has ebbed. However, the demand for change is genuine and comes from below, and it may therefore be assumed that in the final analysis, at an unspecified time, a more moderate regime will arise in Iran that will be prepared to conduct a meaningful dialogue with the US and also perhaps with Israel. If this happens, then Iran's possession of nuclear weapons would be less threatening.

Yet even if these assumptions turn out to be correct – and this remains to be seen – and Iran does not attempt to employ nuclear weapons against Israel or against other countries, there are still real concerns regarding Iran's acquisition of nuclear capability. First, a nuclear-armed Iran is liable to behave in a more aggressive way toward various countries, including Israel, because of the feeling of self-confidence awarded by the nuclear umbrella. In Israel's case, this aggressiveness might be expressed, for example, through Hizbollah rockets fired against northern Israel, if and when Iran sees the need for this. Second, a nuclear capability would strengthen Iran's status as the mainstay of radical elements inside and outside the

region. It is also liable to cause moderate regimes in the region to align their policy more closely to that of Iran, and the strengthening of radical elements is in turn liable to harm the peaceful relations that Israel is striving to build with the Arab world. Third, the presence of nuclear weapons in Iran may well spur other countries in the region, such as Egypt,

The possibility cannot be ignored that Iran has already secretly constructed additional nuclear facilities that have not yet been identified.

Syria, and Saudi Arabia, to try and develop their own nuclear weapons, and thus accelerate the nuclear arms race in the region. Iran itself might become a distributor of nuclear technology and materials to other countries.

This means that the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran would create an unprecedented situation regarding the capability of harming Israel. It may also aggravate some of Israel's security problems, by increasing their complexity, the capability of dealing with them, and the degree of uncertainty that Israel would be required to face. However, it is not inevitable that the Iranian threat will

increase to the point that it poses a viable endangerment to Israel's very existence.

Deliberating an Attack on the Nuclear Facilities

Israel's attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981 was a successful operation, at least from the military aspect. It achieved surprise, the reactor was seriously damaged, and the attacking air force unit returned to its base without casualties. Iraq was incapable of taking real retaliatory steps against Israel, and in fact did not respond directly, apart from launching missiles against Israel a decade later. Even the resulting international measures employed against Israel were moderate and temporary in nature. The attack's impact on Iraq's nuclear program is less clear. Although the attack disrupted the short-term development of Iraq's nuclear capability, in the long term it is possible that it stepped up Iraq's nuclear efforts.

An Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities would occur under totally different and far more complex conditions. Some of these difficulties are obvious: the Iranian facilities are much further away from Israel than the Iraqi reactor; they are better protected; and some of them are located underground. It is impossible to damage Iran's nuclear capability comprehensively by attacking a single installation, as in the case of Iraq. In order to achieve comprehensive damage, it would be necessary to attack, based on accurate intelligence, at least three or four facilities associated with the uranium enrichment and plutonium

production. It is doubtful if a surprise attack akin to the Iraqi strike might be achieved, since the Iranians fear an Israeli attack and have taken it into account when planning its facilities. An attack on the nuclear power plant under construction in Bushehr – the flagship of Iran's nuclear program, planned to become operational only in 2006 – involves another grave difficulty: hundreds of Russian engineers and technicians are working on the site and are liable to be harmed in an attack. At the same time, the role of the Bushehr reactor in acquiring nuclear weapons is not of the first importance, while an attack on a nuclear power plant is likely to incur substantial international criticism.

An additional military consideration is that Iraq is currently an operational theater of US and British forces. Large American forces are also deployed in the Persian Gulf. Any operation in Iran – in contrast to the attack on the Iraqi reactor – is liable to obligate prior coordination with the US, in order to avoid a clash with American forces. This coordination would also be required because Iran might well retaliate against American targets, and it will therefore be important to inform the US in advance of a strike.

However, the picture is even more complex. In contrast to Iraq of 1981, Iran's development of nuclear capability has occurred on a greater scale and thus has reached a far more advanced stage. It seems that Iran is no longer fundamentally dependent on outside agencies for acquiring nuclear technology, and already possesses

most of the know-how necessary to produce fissile material. It possesses nuclear raw materials and produces centrifuges for uranium enrichment; it has conducted experiments in uranium enrichment and plutonium production; and it apparently harbors professional and skilled manpower in sufficient quantity and quality. This means that even if several major Iranian nuclear facilities were attacked, such as the centrifuges facility for uranium enrichment in Natanz, Iran would be capable of constructing replacement facilities in a short time. The construction of the facility in Natanz took about three years, occurring between 2000 and 2003. Given this experience, construction of a new facility, if not interrupted, is likely to take far less time.

Furthermore, the possibility cannot be ignored that Iran has already secretly constructed additional nuclear facilities that have not yet been identified to back up those discovered. It should be remembered that an important part of Iran's major nuclear facilities – including the centrifuges facility in Natanz, the factories for production of the centrifuges, the laser enrichment plant, and the plant for manufacturing heavy water in Arak – were not known before 2001-2002. Since the centrifuge facilities and the factories used for producing them can be concealed in relatively small buildings, the possibility that such facilities already secretly exist is a real one, and is liable to leave Iran with a significant surviving capability even after the known facilities are attacked.

An attack on the facilities would

lead Iran to a crossroads regarding the continuation of its nuclear program. The attack might convince the Iranians that Israel and/or the US is determined to halt the program, even if it is necessary to repeat the attacks on facilities that would be discovered or rebuilt. However, there is a reasonable probability that the attack would not cause Iran to abandon its attempts to acquire nuclear weapons, at least as long as the present regime and the hostile relations with the US continue. Iran's nuclear program is a national project and there is broad internal agreement regarding the need to continue it. Since Iran has already made considerable progress toward achieving nuclear weapons, an attack on the facilities may spur it into accelerating its efforts, as occurred in Iraq after Israel bombed its reactor.

The operation is also liable to present Iran as the victim of aggression, and in this way aid it to reject the international pressure and the demand for IAEA supervision. It may even permit Iran to cancel its signature to the NPT without having to pay a heavy price for doing so. The assumption that Iran will not halt its nuclear program even after an attack should lead to the conclusion that the best that can be expected is that an operation would delay the completion of the program for several years at least, in the hope that until then a more moderate regime, one that is willing to abandon the program in the course of a dialogue with the US, gains power in Tehran.

Iran has the capability of retaliating against Israel following an attack.

This capability is still relatively limited, and currently lies in three areas:

- Launching Shihab-3 missiles against Israeli territory. The missile is still not accurate, but is liable to be effective against large targets, unless intercepted by the Arrow system. Iran has already explicitly declared that it will retaliate by launching these missiles against Israel in the event of an attack on its nuclear facilities.

- Encouragement of the Hizbollah to operate its large rocket array against northern Israel, as well as further Iranian encouragement of the Palestinian organizations to increase their terrorist attacks against Israel.

- Perpetrating showcase terrorist attacks against Israeli/Jewish targets outside Israel.

Furthermore, an attack on the facilities would spark a long term conflict between Iran and Israel, so that an Iranian response might come immediately or after a significant period of time.

Finally, an Israeli attack that harmed Iran's nuclear program would serve the interests of many countries – the US, additional Western countries, and even Arab and Islamic countries that regard themselves as threatened by Iran. Nonetheless, serious criticism of such an attack can be expected, even on the part of countries concerned by Iran's nuclear ambitions. Some Muslim countries would regard such an attack as an act of aggression against the Muslim world in general, and this may well have a negative influence on what remains of the relations between Israel

and Arab and Islamic countries. Moreover, an attack of this sort would be regarded as a joint operation between the US and Israel, certainly if coordinated in advance, and is liable to contribute to increased hostility in the Arab and Muslim world toward the United States.

The major burden of dealing with the Iranian nuclear threat – by both diplomatic and military means – must be borne by the US administration, and not by Israel.

Practical Conclusions

An overall assessment suggests that risks involved in an Israeli attack on the Iranian nuclear facilities outweigh the opportunities. An attack would have to take into consideration operational and other problems that are liable to impede success, while at the same time may spark an Iranian and international response, if only a limited one. Consequently, the conclusion is that Israel must permit the international community to make every possible effort to halt Iran's nuclear program by diplomatic means and to consign military steps to a last resort. This conclusion is particularly valid at the current stage, as long as Iran is obligated to honor its agreement to

suspend its suspected nuclear activities, since in this situation there is no international legitimacy for attacking the nuclear facilities in Iran. Obviously this approach incorporates a difficulty: the timetable for exhausting all diplomatic steps is limited to the point at which it will no longer be possible to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons, and an accurate timetable is not known in advance.

This analysis does not attempt to reject categorically an Israeli military option as a means of halting Iran's attempts to achieve nuclear weapons. The existence of this option may also be of importance in intensifying the diplomatic pressure on Iran. However, there is a set of conditions essential to the success of a military operation; if these conditions are not met, it seems preferable that the operation not be conducted. The major conditions are:

- Obtaining an accurate intelligence estimate of the state of the Iranian nuclear program. The failures of the intelligence communities of the Western countries prior to the war in Iraq emphasize the vital necessity for presenting a firm estimate that Iran is in fact close to achieving nuclear weapons.

- Accurate intelligence regarding not only the known facilities but also the possible existence of unknown facilities. This intelligence must ascertain in advance that the attack would damage Iran's nuclear program for a significant period of time. If it transpires that following the attack the completion of the program is delayed by one or two years only, it is possi-

ble that the result does not justify the risks. It will also be necessary to take into account that the circumstances will not permit a repeated attack on major facilities that were not damaged in the first attack or that were discovered later.

■ An estimate of a high probability of success of the operation. The worst possible operational scenario is failure, which would encourage the Iranians to continue with their program out of a sense of immunity. This would involve a heavy price as far as Israel is concerned.

■ Achieving prior coordination with the US. Such coordination is important and perhaps even vital for execution of the operation, since the attack routes are liable to pass through areas of deployment of the American forces, and it is important to reduce the related risks. Coordination with the US is itself problematic: there is no certainty that the American administration would agree to such coordination, which brings with it its own set of risks, and it is not certain it would favor a military operation against Iran. Nevertheless, the possibility cannot be excluded that the ad-

ministration would be interested in Israel doing the dirty work, in order to present it as an independent Israeli operation and thereby reduce the risks of association with this operation.

■ International circumstances that would help to justify the operation, such as an Iranian announcement that it is canceling its signature to the NPT, and significant additional discoveries regarding its nuclear program, coinciding with diplomatic activities reaching an impasse. It is important that the Israeli operation not be regarded as disruption of the diplomatic efforts to halt the program.

Given the difficulties and risks involved in implementation of the military option, Israel must adopt the position that the major burden of dealing with the Iranian nuclear threat – by both diplomatic and military means – must be borne by the US administration, and not by Israel. There are two reasons for this: the Iranian threat is directed not only at Israel, but also at the vital interests of the US itself and at its allies; and the US is also likely to be better prepared to conduct a military campaign in Iran and to

cope with the ramifications and risks. In the final analysis, the handling of a problem of this magnitude must be the responsibility of a superpower and not a local country.

Finally, Israel must also prepare in advance for a scenario in which Iran will possess nuclear weapons, despite its efforts to prevent this. Such a scenario will obligate Israel to redefine its security concept and reevaluate the policy of nuclear ambiguity. Part of these preparations must involve an effort to reach agreement with the US administration that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons, the administration will clearly and explicitly declare that any Iranian nuclear attack against Israel or any other ally of the US would be regarded as a nuclear attack against the US itself and would prompt the commensurate response. Such a declaration must also make clear that the US will not tolerate even a threat of an Iranian nuclear attack against its allies. It may be assumed that such a prior declaration would form a principal deterrent against Iran and would help to mitigate the impact of an Iranian nuclear threat.

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