

# **An Attack on Iran: The Morning After**

**Ephraim Kam**

In recent months there has been talk both in Israel and abroad about the possibility of a military operation against Iranian nuclear installations. Several factors have contributed to this development: reports that progress on the Iranian nuclear program is bringing Israel closer to the moment of decision about a military strike; the public debate on the topic in Israel; Israel's desire to increase the pressure on Iran and other governments to take effective steps to stop the program; efforts by the American administration to try to ensure that Israel does not act against Iran independently of the United States; and Iran's counter measures, indicative of the pressure within the Iranian leadership due to concern about a possible strike.

This essay seeks to examine the developments that might ensue following a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. The essay does not deal with the operational aspects of a strike or other considerations relevant to such a decision. Rather, assuming that a strike has been carried out by Israel and/or the US, it seeks to analyze the possible results in various realms and their significance.

The underlying assumption of this analysis is that a military operation would focus on Iran's nuclear facilities for the purpose of stopping or at least delaying the nuclear program for a considerable period of time. In any case, the essay is not assuming a widespread ground campaign, territorial conquest, or an attempt to change the Iranian regime, the way the US set out to do in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, even within this assumption, a military strike could consist of varying scopes: an attack

Dr. Ephraim Kam is deputy director of INSS.

on a single nuclear installation as a deterrent or a warning; a limited strike against two or three of the most important installations to destroy or severely damage them; an extensive strike against all the important installations as well as against sites involved in the manufacture of other weapons of mass destruction; or a strike on additional strategic military capabilities, such as missile sites, navy units, or Revolutionary Guards targets in order to damage Iran's response capabilities.<sup>1</sup> This essay will not analyze the implications of all these alternatives, but in general, the larger the scope of the operation, the more extensive the ramifications are likely to be.

### Principal Considerations

In terms of the implications of a military strike, it is necessary to distinguish between two basic scenarios: (a) an attack carried out by Israel, and (b) an attack carried out by the US. There is also the possibility of a joint US-Israel strike, which given American involvement would be similar in most ways to an American strike.

Two essential reasons create a fundamental difference between an American strike and an Israeli attack. One, the US has much better operational capabilities to strike at Iran, both because of the quality of its weapon systems and armaments and because of the much shorter distance between its departure bases and the Iranian targets. Therefore, the US is in a better position than Israel to carry out repeated strikes against targets to ensure their destruction; time-wise, the US is also able to carry out a longer military operation. For the same reason, the US is also in a better position to attack a wider circle of Iranian strategic targets, should it see the need to do so. The second reason: the US has greater deterrent capabilities than Israel and better capabilities to confront the Iranian response and withstand international criticism.

An analysis of the ramifications of a military strike must examine some central issues:

- a. The ramifications of the strike for the future of Iran's nuclear program and for Iran's determination and capabilities in this realm.
- b. Iran's response against Israel, the US, and perhaps also America's other allies after coming under attack. In this context, it is also necessary to examine the extent to which a strike could set off an extensive confrontation in the region.

- c. The position of international actors, including among the Arab and Muslim world, regarding a strike.
- d. The ramifications of a strike on the oil market.
- e. The ramifications of a strike for Iran's internal situation, especially the degree of the Iranian public's support for the regime and the status of the opposition movement.

Some central elements would affect the ramifications of a strike, the most important being the stance of the US on a strike, regardless of whether the US or Israel undertakes it. In this context, an Israeli strike raises several questions. Would the American administration give Israel the green light to embark on such an operation? What would the position of the administration be were Israel to embark on an operation without American agreement or coordination with the administration? Would the US help Israel, even if the operation were not coordinated, in handling the Iranian response and the subsequent international pressure? And would the administration itself take steps against Israel were an Israeli operation to be carried out without coordination with the US?

An additional important element would be the success of the strike. If the results are considered a success, one could expect the steps and criticism aimed against Israel (and/or the US) to be limited and fade with time, as was the case after the operation against the nuclear reactor in Iraq in 1981. The reason is that despite the widespread reservations about a military move, a large majority of the governments involved would like to see the Iranian nuclear program stopped, even by military means. Here, however, the critical question is what would constitute success. Generally speaking, the destruction of at least some of the critical nuclear facilities that would delay Iran's quest for nuclear weapons by a minimum of three to five years at a tolerable cost to the attacking force would be considered a successful result.

A third factor would be the circumstances under which an operation would take place, especially if these could justify the strike insofar as the involved governments are concerned. Circumstances that would help justify a strike include significant new revelations about the Iranian nuclear project that would serve as persuasive evidence that Iran has

It is unlikely that Iran would be interested in expanding the circle of confrontation to other nations in the case of an attack by Israel.

decided to break out towards nuclear arms; the recognition by Western governments that political means to stop Iran have exhausted themselves and hit a dead end; blatant steps by Iran in the nuclear context such as withdrawing from the Non-Proliferation Treaty; or the possibility – albeit slim – that Iran would undertake a first strike and attack before a military move is made against it, as it is currently threatening to do.

A fourth element concerns the future and reconstruction of Iran's nuclear program. The common assumption is that an attack on its facilities would not stop the program, but would at most postpone its completion by several years. This is a realistic assumption. It is likely that the Iranian regime would feel committed to rebuild its nuclear facilities as fast as possible and continue to advance the program while assimilating lessons from the strike, including improving fortifications and dispersing the sites. This assumption rests on several foundations: the Iranian regime has a principled interest in possessing nuclear arms; the program plays a key role in the regime's conduct, so that stopping it would constitute a defeat for the regime and an impressive victory for the regime's bitter enemies; significant progress has already been made and efforts and resources invested to date essentially obviate the possibility of the regime abandoning it now; and the regime's belief that a strike is but a first step in an attempt to depose it. Nonetheless, should Iran become convinced that the attacker is determined to stop the program, even if this requires the attacker to attack the sites over and over again, it may be that reconstruction efforts would be abandoned over time. Such a possibility applies primarily if a strike is carried out by the US.

The possible effort to reconstruct the nuclear program has another aspect. Iran is expected to take advantage of an attack to build future legitimacy in the international arena for the development of nuclear arms. To this end, it may try to exploit a strike to free itself of the sanctions and IAEA inspections, and perhaps even withdraw from the NPT without having to pay a steep price. Moreover, if Iran has yet to decide to break out towards nuclear weapons, a strike is liable to give it justification for doing so.

Finally, a central element would be Iran's response to a strike. There is hardly any doubt that Iran would respond to an attack with the use of force, unlike Iraq's decision in 1981 and Syria's decision in 2007 to refrain from retaliating. A strike would be seen by Iran as part of the unremitting

struggle against its bitter foes, in which it cannot show any weakness and avoid retaliation for so flagrant a move; Iran's desire for regional hegemony would compel it to react forcefully to a strike; and Iran has publicly avowed to respond to a strike against it with force. Still, Iran would have to take into account its limited capabilities when deciding how to respond.

### **An Israeli Attack against Iranian Nuclear Sites**

The starting assumption is that should Israel decide to carry out a military strike against Iran, it would concentrate on critical nuclear sites. This does not mean that Israel would not examine more extensive possibilities, especially in order to limit Iran's capabilities of response. For the move against Iran's nuclear sites to be deemed a success, the key question is: how much more time would Iran need to complete its nuclear project? There is only a slim chance that Iran would abandon the project altogether as the result of a single – even if successful – strike. Moreover, assessing the delay in the Iranian timetable would depend primarily on the extent of the damage to the sites, the time Iran would need to rebuild, and Iran's determination, factors that cannot be known ahead of time. One may assume that some of the buildings and equipment would be damaged in a successful strike but some would survive and/or be able to be rebuilt, while the manpower at the sites would suffer little injury. That is to say, the technology and know-how would be affected only in part and could serve as the basis for site reconstruction.

However, beyond these general assumptions, important questions remain, such as: how much time would it take Iran to recover from the strike until reconstruction begins? Would it be possible to use the current sites, or would it be necessary to build new ones? Have the Iranians already constructed alternate sites – perhaps small underground facilities – to be used in case existing sites come under attack, thereby shortening the time it would take to rebuild the program? Would the Iranians run into trouble acquiring equipment to reconstruct the sites? Would a successful strike require them to invest time and effort to improve the means for reinforcing the sites? For many years Iran has taken a possible Israeli and/or American attack on its nuclear facilities into consideration and has prepared for such a scenario. These preparations are liable to shorten the time needed for reconstruction.

In light of these questions, the American administration has estimated that a military strike would buy one or two years of breathing space, whereas the Israeli estimate is a gain of three to five years.<sup>2</sup> The difference between the two assessments could be critical. If the American estimate is correct, one to two years might not justify a military strike. Even a longer delay, however, prompts the question of what might be gained. The main hope is that within such a period, the Iranian regime would change, which in itself could remove the Iranian threat. However, for the moment the regime seems to be stable, and despite the potential for change there is no guarantee that this will occur in the next few years. Moreover, even if the regime changes, there is no guarantee that its successor would forfeit the development of nuclear arms. Today there seems to be widespread general support for the nuclear program as a national project. Still, one could expect that the significance of the Iranian nuclear threat would shrink under a more moderate regime, even if Iran at that time possessed nuclear weapons.

A further central question concerns Iran's response to a military move. An Israeli strike against Iran would create a long term account between the two countries that is not likely to be settled for many years, on the part of the regime and among the Iranian people. This means that an Iranian response would be launched immediately and then continue for a long period. Iran has two ways to retaliate: missile and rocket fire, either from its territory or via its proxies, and acts of terrorism.

Iran has dozens of launchers and hundreds of missiles of various ranges and with them can reach every part of Israel. Iran has threatened to respond to an Israeli attack with massive missile fire, and it would likely do so very soon after an attack. Iran also has limited capabilities to attack Israeli targets from the air, because it has 24-32 Sukhoi-24 planes with sufficient range to reach Israel. However, it is highly doubtful that Iran would use this option given Israel's air force and aerial defenses.

In addition, Iran would likely ask Hizbollah and Hamas to direct massive rocket fire toward Israel from Lebanon and Gaza, though a positive response by Hizbollah and Hamas is not a foregone conclusion. Hizbollah may fear that Israel would use such fire to settle its accounts with the organization, while Hamas is not as intimately connected to Iran as is Hizbollah and is under no obligation to risk its own welfare on behalf of Iran. Nonetheless, Hizbollah and perhaps Hamas too would likely join

in an Iranian response with massive rocket fire aimed at Israel. Even were Hamas to decide not to open fire at Israel, smaller organizations in the Gaza Strip – especially Islamic Jihad, with its closer connections to Iran – might do so. Furthermore, Iran would presumably employ the terrorist networks it has established in various states to carry out large showcase attacks, directly and/or via Hizbollah, against Israeli and Jewish targets in Israel and abroad.

Were Iran to respond with missile fire against Israel, the more likely possibility is that these missiles would carry conventional warheads. However, Iran has missiles with chemical and perhaps also biological warheads in its possession. It is less likely that Iran would use these missiles because it has no doubt that Israel possesses a reserve of nuclear arms, and it would have to consider the possibility that Israel would respond to non-conventional fire with a nuclear attack. Still, the scenario cannot be ruled out completely.

Even were an attack to be carried out by Israel, the US could find itself involved in the confrontation under two possible situations. Were Iran to decide, justifiably or not, that the US was a partner to the Israeli attack, it is liable to attack American targets, especially in the Gulf region. Alternately, the US may see a need to help Israel face Iran if the confrontation between them expands and becomes more complicated, e.g., by setting up anti-missile defense systems in case of need. In this context, some worry that a military operation in Iran could lead to a regional war in which the US and the Gulf states would also become entangled. However, the likelihood of this scenario is low and deterioration would have its limits. There would be no ground campaign to speak of, rather aerial attacks and missiles. Most importantly, Iran would probably not attack US and Gulf targets excessively, if it decides to attack them at all. In any case, it is unlikely that Iran would be interested in expanding the circle of confrontation to other nations in the case of an attack by Israel; the more reasonable possibility is that in such a scenario most nations in the region would not become embroiled in violent action.

An additional issue is the significance of an attack for the international community. An Israeli attack on Iran would not have

The results of a military operation would be much more impressive if carried out by the US rather than Israel.



international support. All the governments involved, other than the American administration, have expressed reservations about such a move, both publicly and privately. While the American administration has not ruled it out in principle, it too has reservations about it under current circumstances. Consequently, Israel is liable to find itself harshly condemned and accused of fostering regional deterioration, and the focus of criticism may shift from Iran to Israel. One cannot rule out the possibility that sanctions would be imposed on Israel and that the issue of inspecting Israel's nuclear capabilities would be raised again. The key to the severity of such steps would to a great extent lie in the stance adopted by the American administration. In tandem, it would be more difficult to continue to level harsh sanctions against Iran: various nations are already less than keen on this option, and an Israeli attack might provide the excuse to scale back their involvement.

The stance of the American administration would be greatly affected by prior coordination between the US and Israel. Were Israel to receive the green light from the American administration to attack and were Israel to coordinate the attack with it, the administration may work to reduce the criticism directed at Israel. Conversely, were Israel to surprise the administration and carry out an attack without prior coordination, even were Israel to inform the administration at the last moment, the US could join in the criticism of Israel and take steps against it. The issue has broader significance: the move against Iran would not end with only a military strike, even if successful. A political/diplomatic move would be necessary to ensure the strategic gain, including increasing the pressure on Iran and entering into negotiations from a position of power in order to define the terms of an arrangement with Iran on the nuclear issue. The administration's stance would have a great deal of influence on the political/diplomatic stage, and would determine whether the level of willingness to exploit the military strike to stop Iran outweighs the criticism of Israel for having attacked. The answer to this question would also be affected by the attack's rate of success.

In addition there is the reality that many Arab nations are afraid of a nuclear Iran, and some of the Gulf states have encouraged the administration to do everything possible, even using military force, to prevent this. However, even if these nations were to view an Israeli attack with favor behind tightly closed doors, they would almost certainly use



such an attack to criticize and isolate Israel. Should such an attack create a harsh climate for Israel in the Arab and Muslim world, this might adversely affect Israel's relations with Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey.

Finally, the possibility of failure must also be considered, whereby there is no significant damage to the nuclear sites and/or the attack comes at a high cost. This of course is the worst scenario from Israel's point of view, because the nuclear threat would remain unchanged, Iran would have the justification it wants to break out and attain nuclear arms, Israel's deterrence would be damaged, and Iran would be liable to decide to take action against Israel.

### **An American Attack on Iran**

The US has much better capabilities than Israel to undertake a military action against Iran, and therefore has a variety of options regarding the use of force, including:

- a. Imposing a naval blockade against Iran as a warning, without opening fire.
- b. Attacking regime targets, such as Revolutionary Guards targets, government facilities, or missile and naval units, both for the sake of warning and also to damage Iran's response capabilities.
- c. Attacking nuclear targets, and perhaps also other strategic-military sites.

Among the American capabilities, the most important in the context of attacking the nuclear facilities in Iran is the ability to carry out repeated attacks over time, thereby ensuring not just the success of the operation but also prolonging Iran's timetable for completing its nuclear project by a significant period of time. Furthermore, while Iran would want to rebuild its sites, repeated American attacks could convince Iran that the American administration is determined to stop the nuclear project, that there is no point in continuing the efforts to reconstruct the facilities, and that Iran would be better off abandoning its efforts to attain nuclear arms. Were the US willing and determined to attack Iran repeatedly, one may assume that it would gain more than just a one or two year postponement in the Iranian nuclear timetable – as the administration currently predicts – and could conceivably even stop the project altogether.

Iran would also likely respond to an American attack. Such a response could bear several features. First, there is a reasonable probability that

Iran would attack American targets in the Middle East, whether military or civilian, especially in the Gulf region, using rockets and missiles and terrorism, whether perpetrated by Iran itself or by its proxies. In such a case, the most vulnerable American targets are likely to be in Afghanistan, Iraq, Gulf states, and Persian Gulf waters. While the American forces have withdrawn from Iraq and cannot be targeted for attack there, tens of thousands of American soldiers stationed in the Gulf and thousands of American civilians who have remained in Iraq as consultants are liable to serve as targets. Even if the preference is for attacks in the Gulf area, because Iran has better capabilities for attacking American targets there than elsewhere, Iranian terrorist attacks could occur in other locations too. The probability of an Iranian terrorist attack on US soil is more remote, and in any case Iran would try not to leave its fingerprints so as not to encourage an escalation in counterattacks against it.

Second, as a result of an American attack Iran would likely respond with missile fire and terrorist attacks against Israel, even if Israel does not participate in an initial strike. The reason is twofold: as far as Iran is concerned, Israel is America's partner in creating the threat against it, and Israel is responsible for inciting the administration to attack. Also, in practical terms, it is convenient for Iran to attack Israel.

At the same time, Iran would likely restrain its response toward the US, both because of concern about a comprehensive conflict with a superpower with inestimably better military capabilities than its own and also because of the fear, deeply rooted in the Iranian leadership, that the US would use the circumstances to try to topple the Islamic regime in Tehran. Iran would therefore have to find the golden mean between the desire to respond to so flagrant an attack on its strategic capabilities and the concern that an over-reaction would boomerang.

Iran is also liable to attack US allies, especially in the Gulf, with missiles and terrorism. Iran has already issued public warnings that it would attack any nation aiding an attack against it. Still, it is probable that in such a scenario Iran would again refrain from escalating its response, fearing an American over-reaction.

In turn, the US would likely respond with force to Iran's retaliation. Therefore, it is precisely the scenario of an American attack that is liable to widen the circle of confrontation, though even then it is likely

that it would not lead to an expanded regional conflict because of Iran's expected cautiousness and America's deterrent capabilities.

At this point, no Western government other than Israel would support a military operation, and would certainly not take part should the American administration decide to act. This lack of support stems not only from the West's reservations about the use of force and concern about its ramifications, but also from the fact that to date the administration has done nothing to shore up the political support and perhaps also the support of the Security Council that it would need for an attack. Unless the administration rallies international support, it is liable to be exposed to much international criticism as well as criticism on the home front. This could lead to a wave of anti-American and anti-Israel demonstrations in the Arab and Muslim world. Therefore, should the administration decide on attacking Iran, it is likely to prepare the political ground before undertaking the operation, both among its allies and at home; in that case, the picture could change, at least in part. If the administration does in fact gain support for an attack, its subsequent political situation would be better, and any criticism would be more muted. Moreover, even if it is does not garner sufficient international support, the administration would still be able to handle such criticism without any particular difficulty, in part because nations are interested in seeing the Iranian nuclear enterprise stopped.

### Two Additional Implications

An Israeli or American attack on Iran can be expected to have a negative effect on the oil market, for two direct reasons: one, Iran has threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz in retaliation for an attack. The probability of Iran making good on this threat is low, because Iran would be damaging its own oil exports more than anything else, and because the US and Great Britain have explicitly stated that they would open the Strait by force. At the same time, the probability of this threat rises should Iran be prevented from exporting its oil. The second reason could be Iranian attacks on oil installations and tankers belonging to the Gulf states should America

An American or Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities would likely rally a large part of the Iranian people around the regime, at least in the immediate aftermath.

Therefore, Iranian opposition elements have also expressed reservations about an attack.

attack Iran. However, even if Iran avoids taking these steps, the price of oil is liable to increase, at least temporarily, as a result of the tension and uncertainty that would ensue in the wake of a military operation. Should oil prices rise, the attacker – Israel and/or the US – would be blamed.

Another issue concerns the effect of an attack on Iran's internal system. It is reasonable to assume that an American or Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities would rally a large part of the Iranian people around the regime, at least in the immediate aftermath. While some Iranians are interested in regime change, they would not welcome an external attack on a national project such as the nuclear program. In this sense, an attack could actually help the regime and hurt the opposition, and therefore Iranian opposition elements have also expressed reservations about an attack. Nevertheless, the fundamental internal opposition to the regime among many Iranians would not disappear, and after some time it would likely break out again.

## Conclusion

There is a great deal of uncertainty regarding the consequences of a military operation in Iran because of the many variables, chief among them the extent of damage to the nuclear facilities. This factor would have the greatest effect on both the amount of time the Iranian nuclear program would be delayed and the severity of the Iranian response. In any case, it is clear that the results of the operation would be much more impressive if carried out by the US rather than Israel.

Assessing the Iranian response is an important factor in any decision by Israel or the US to embark on a military operation against Iran. There is little doubt that Iran would respond to the attack, by itself or through its proxies, and that such a response might be painful. However, some considerations are likely to restrain and curtail Iran's response, first of all Iran's limited military capabilities and its fear of an extensive conflict with the US, in the case of an American attack. Therefore it is more likely that the circle of confrontation would include Iran and its proxies, Israel, the US, and perhaps also some of the Gulf states, in a limited scope. However, the probability of a regional conflict seems low.

Even if an Israeli attack is successful, it carries several risks: in addition to Iran's response, Israel would face a wave of international criticism, at least in the short term, and would perhaps also have to deal

with sanctions; Israel would be blamed for the increase in oil prices; and the Muslim and Arab world would see waves of criticism and fury against Israel liable to damage Israel's relations with Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey. Moreover, an Israeli attack would apparently not stop the Iranian nuclear project for more than a few years, and Iran would seek to exploit the attack to gain legitimacy for its nuclear program, rid itself of inspections and sanctions, and even attempt to break out towards nuclear arms. The worst scenario of all would be a failed attack, because the nuclear threat would remain in place and Israel's deterrence would be damaged.

Should an attack be carried out by the US, the chances for success would be significantly increased. America's operational capabilities would allow it to undertake repeated attacks on the nuclear sites and thereby increase the damage to them, earning a longer postponement of Iran's nuclear arms ambition or persuading Iran to abandon the project altogether. Nonetheless, even an American attack would bear its own risks: an Iranian missile and/or terrorism response against the US and Israel and perhaps also US allies in the Gulf, increased oil prices, and criticism and fury around the world directed at the US and Israel.

At the same time, should a military operation be successful and Iran's acquisition of nuclear arms be delayed by several years, this would have strategic significance: there would be a window of opportunity for eliminating Iran's nuclear development; Iran's regional status could be weakened, thus also weakening the radical camp in the area; the Israeli and/or US deterrence against Iran would be strengthened; the position of the US in the region, which has declined in the last ten years in part because of its entanglement in Iraq, would be enhanced; and the self-confidence of the Gulf states vis-à-vis Iran would be strengthened.

## Notes

- 1 Anthony Cordesman, *Israeli and US Strikes on Iran: A Speculative Analysis* (Washington, DC, Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 5, 2007).
- 2 See, for example, remarks by Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta at the Saban Forum, December 2, 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4937>; Ronen Bergman, "Will Israel Attack Iran?" *New York Times Magazine*, December 25, 2011.