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Israel's Last Chance to Strike Iran

By AMOS YADLIN

Tel Aviv

ON July 7, 1981, I was one of eight Israeli fighter pilots who bombed the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak. As we sat in the briefing room listening to the army chief of staff, Rafael Eitan, before starting our planes' engines, I recalled a conversation a week earlier when he'd asked us to voice any concerns about our mission.

We told him about the risks we foresaw: running out of fuel, Iraqi retaliation, how a strike could harm our relationship with America, and the limited impact a successful mission might have — perhaps delaying Iraq's nuclear quest by only a few years. Listening to today's debates about Iran, we hear the same arguments and face the same difficulties, even though we understand it is not 1981.

Shortly after we destroyed Osirak, the Israeli defense attaché in Washington was called into the Pentagon. He was expecting a rebuke. Instead, he was faced with a single question: How did you do it? The United States military had assumed that the F-16 aircraft they had provided to Israel had neither the range nor the ordnance to attack Iraq successfully. The mistake then, as now, was to underestimate Israel's military ingenuity.

We had simply maximized fuel efficiency and used experienced pilots, trained specifically for this mission. We ejected our external fuel tanks en route to Iraq and then attacked the reactor with pinpoint accuracy from so close and such a low altitude that our unguided bombs were as accurate and effective as precision-guided munitions.

Today, Israel sees the prospect of a nuclear Iran that calls for our annihilation as an existential threat. An Israeli strike against Iran would be a last resort, if all else failed to persuade Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons program. That moment of decision will occur when Iran is on the verge of shielding its nuclear facilities from a successful attack — what

Israel's leaders have called the "zone of immunity."

Some experts oppose an attack because they claim that even a successful strike would, at best, delay Iran's nuclear program for only a short time. But their analysis is faulty. Today, almost any industrialized country can produce a nuclear weapon in four to five years — hence any successful strike would achieve a delay of only a few years.

What matters more is the campaign after the attack. When we were briefed before the Osirak raid, we were told that a successful mission would delay the Iraqi nuclear program for only three to five years. But history told a different story.

After the Osirak attack and the destruction of the Syrian reactor in 2007, the Iraqi and Syrian nuclear programs were never fully resumed. This could be the outcome in Iran, too, if military action is followed by tough sanctions, stricter international inspections and an embargo on the sale of nuclear components to Tehran. Iran, like Iraq and Syria before it, will have to recognize that the precedent for military action has been set, and can be repeated.

Others claim that an attack on the Iranian nuclear program would destabilize the region. But a nuclear Iran could lead to far worse: a regional nuclear arms race without a red phone to defuse an escalating crisis, Iranian aggression in the Persian Gulf, more confident Iranian surrogates like Hezbollah and the threat of nuclear materials' being transferred to terrorist organizations.

Ensuring that Iran does not go nuclear is the best guarantee for long-term regional stability. A nonnuclear Iran would be infinitely easier to contain than an Iran with nuclear weapons.

President Obama has said America will "use all elements of American power to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon." Israel takes him at his word.

The problem, however, is one of time. Israel doesn't have the safety of distance, nor do we have the United States Air Force's advanced fleet of bombers and fighters. America could carry out an extensive air campaign using stealth technology and huge amounts of ammunition, dropping enormous payloads that are capable of hitting targets and penetrating to depths far beyond what Israel's arsenal can achieve.

This gives America more time than Israel in determining when the moment of decision has finally been reached. And as that moment draws closer, differing timetables are becoming a source of tension.

On Monday, Mr. Obama and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel are to meet in Washington. Of all their encounters, this could be the most critical. Asking Israel's leaders to abide by America's timetable, and hence allowing Israel's window of opportunity to be closed, is to make Washington a de facto proxy for Israel's security — a tremendous leap of faith for Israelis faced with a looming Iranian bomb. It doesn't help when American officials warn Israel against acting without clarifying what America intends to do once its own red lines are crossed.

Mr. Obama will therefore have to shift the Israeli defense establishment's thinking from a focus on the "zone of immunity" to a "zone of trust." What is needed is an ironclad American assurance that if Israel refrains from acting in its own window of opportunity — and all other options have failed to halt Tehran's nuclear quest — Washington will act to prevent a nuclear Iran while it is still within its power to do so.

I hope Mr. Obama will make this clear. If he does not, Israeli leaders may well choose to act while they still can.

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