

Israel, the United States, and the Military Option against Iran

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For more than a decade, Israel and the United States have been engaged in an intensive strategic dialogue over the nature and scope of Iran's nuclear activity, the implications of the nuclear program, and the ways to handle the issue. Senior spokespeople of both countries have often stressed that although there is not total agreement on all aspects of the issue under discussion, the dialogue takes place in a very open atmosphere based on the understanding that the two nations espouse a common objective: keeping Iran from becoming a military nuclear power. In this context, both are willing to share information, including highly classified material.

At present, the United States and Israel are of the opinion that Iran intends to realize its strategic goal – attaining military nuclear capabilities – at some point in the future, and that Iran possesses the scientific and technological abilities and resources to do so. Furthermore, the United States and Israel agree that a nuclear Iran would pose a real threat to their respective critical interests and those of other nations in the region. Foremost in this regard is the danger of nuclear weapons proliferation in the Middle East, should Iran have the bomb. The common assumption is that since various Middle East countries view Iran as a dangerous enemy and feel that a nuclear Iran endangers their respective critical interests, they consequently would feel compelled to balance a nuclear Iran with their own nuclear capabilities. In this context, the nations most frequently mentioned are Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey. There is broad agreement that those three countries have the

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economic, scientific, and technological potential allowing them to reach nuclear capabilities at some point in the future.¹

If these countries do develop nuclear capabilities, the international community in general and the Middle East in particular will face a potentially disastrous reality. These nations are located in a politically and economically volatile part of the world, home to extremist Islamic organizations. Furthermore, their decision making processes are different from those considered acceptable in modern, developed nations, such as the United States or the former Soviet Union. Therefore, the widespread premise is that it would be highly dangerous to allow the Middle East to become home to the sort of hostility typifying the superpowers during the Cold War. The potential slide toward a nuclear conflict is more palpable in this region where the large Western powers, especially the United States, have critical interests of the highest order – economic, political, and military. Should these suffer, the West's interests in general, and those of the United States in particular, will be seriously damaged.

Moreover, the presence of nuclear weapons in Iranian hands will dramatically bolster Tehran's self-confidence. The Iranian regime upholds a radical Islamic ideology that strives to impose Islamic law on the entire world, starting with the regions close to Iran. With the help of its nuclear weapons, Iran will likely actively seek to undermine the regimes of neighboring countries, starting with Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. Iran will be able to count on nuclear weapons to deter these countries from trying to attack it in response to hostile activity. Should this happen, the United States will face a reality in which its major allies in the region – whose powers of response are limited – are seriously challenged.

This situation will confront the United States with a very difficult dilemma. A direct response is liable to drag the United States into an acute confrontation with powerful regional nations such as Iran and Syria, with outcomes difficult to foresee. On the other hand, failure to respond is liable to cause severe damage to US credibility in the eyes of its allies and to its deterrence in the eyes of its enemies. Should Iran realize its objective and take over those countries, either directly or indirectly, critical national American interests will be dealt a harsh blow.

Iran with military nuclear capabilities will almost certainly seek to enhance its support for Islamic terrorist organizations, especially Hizbollah. Iran would conclude that even if these organizations escalate their hostile activities

against various regional countries, first and foremost Israel, the nations under attack will hesitate to respond with its own escalation for fear of a debilitating counterattack, in the form of massive missile and rocket fire at population centers and a confrontation with Iran itself. Such circumstances are ultimately liable to drag the region's nations into a widespread war that would endanger Western interests in general and US interests in particular.

Given the serious dangers inherent in a nuclearized Iran, Israel and the United States believe that every effort must be made to prevent realization of this scenario. President Barack Obama and senior members of the US administration have made it unequivocally clear many times that the United States will not allow Iran to attain military nuclear capabilities, because this would endanger US critical interests. On several occasions, President Obama has stated explicitly that the US policy on Iran's nuclear program is one of "prevention," rather than one of "containment."² Israel, especially under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu, has also stressed – more directly and more frequently – that it will not allow Iran to become a nuclear power.

Israel and the United States agree that before the military option is contemplated, it is necessary to give diplomatic means and/or economic sanctions a chance to conclude an arrangement with Iran over its nuclear activity. The military option must be considered only after it is clear that all other options have failed to deter Iran and it continues to advance its nuclear activities. President Obama has repeatedly emphasized that the military option is "on the table" and that the United States would consider it should it become clear that it is impossible to stop Iran's nuclear activities using other means. Officially, Israel has stressed that if and when it becomes clear that Iranian nuclearization can be stopped only by military means, it would prefer that the United States take action against Iran, preferably as part of an international coalition.³

Israel correctly estimates that US abilities to damage Iran's nuclear facilities effectively are greater than its own. Moreover, while Iran has made it clear that in any attack on it, it would respond against Israel, one may assume that the power of the response against Israel would be much less if an attack were carried out by the United States. Nonetheless, Israel has stated repeatedly that if it becomes clear that the United States does not intend to act militarily against Iran even as Iran's nuclear program advances, Israel will consider using the military option on its own.⁴

The prevailing assumption in Israel is that regarding the Iranian nuclear issue there is a significant gap between the stated US position and the US position in practice, even though President Obama went out of his way to stress that “as President of the United States, I don’t bluff.”⁵ There is much skepticism in Israel regarding the United States’ true intentions vis-à-vis Iran. Israel’s concerns intensified with the interim deal signed between the P5+1 and Iran, although President Obama officially stressed that “all options are on the table,” even after the agreement was signed.⁶ Officials in Israel claim that in the new reality of the interim deal, Iran is not behaving like a nation threatened seriously by a US attack on its nuclear installations, compared, for example, to 2003, when Iran stopped its nuclear activity because of serious concern about a US attack in the wake of the invasion of Iraq.⁷ Accordingly, current US assertions that it is pressuring Iran and making intensive threatening moves against it are irrelevant and ineffective measures. Officially, Israel has pointed out over and over again that in the absence of real and credible deterrence against Iran, there is no chance of success for diplomacy.⁸

How does one explain the apparent gap between the official US position on a nuclear Iran and its position in practice? Everyone agrees that stopping Iran’s nuclearization would serve critical US national interests, and there is no doubt that the United States is honestly committed to act however it can – including with military force – to stop the nuclearization of Iran. Nonetheless, the United States is faced with a wide array of constraints and considerations, making it difficult for it to translate that commitment into action of a military nature.

First among these considerations is the United States perception of the severity of the Iranian threat against the United States compared with the severity of the threat against the State of Israel. Israel, cognizant of the murderous nature of radical Islam and its desire to bring about the physical eradication of the State of Israel, views the Iranian threat as direct and existential. Indeed, Iranian leaders have never hidden these malicious intentions. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has often compared Iran’s nuclear activity to events that preceded the rise of the Nazis to power in Germany. He rejects the attempts of Western nations to assuage Israel’s fears of Iran’s nuclear activity. Netanyahu believes that Western powers are gravely mistaken in their attitude to Iran, just as they erred in their complacency toward Hitler.⁹

Israel also rejects the assertion that for several reasons Iran would not dare attack Israel with nuclear weapons. These ostensible arguments include: a) Iran is well aware of Israel's ability to respond with massive force. Iran estimates that Israel itself has nuclear capabilities and that an Israeli second strike response could inflict unbearable damage on Iran; b) Iran is well aware of the fact that Israel has some of the world's most advanced anti-missile defense systems. It therefore must assume that missiles launched at Israel would be intercepted before reaching their destination; c) Iran is also well aware of the fact that there is a high probability that the United States would respond harshly against Iran should the latter attack Israel with nuclear weapons. However, the prevailing opinion in Israel is that given the regime's extremely radical, zealous religious worldview, one must not assume that Iran will act on the basis of Western rational considerations. Israel must take into account that Iran might operate using all tools at its disposal, even if rationally speaking it realizes that this entails grievous risks to Iran.¹⁰

The characteristics of the State of Israel, especially the fact that it is a relatively small country whose population is concentrated in very small geographical areas, do not allow the country to take the slightest chance when it comes to national security. Should Iran succeed in bombing Israel with a nuclear device, with even a single missile, the human casualties and property damage could prove extensive, and would at the very least require a long and agonizing recovery process.

By contrast, the threat against the United States is much less severe. The United States has no cause for worry, at least not under current circumstances, that Iran could strike it directly even if it possesses nuclear military capability. While some assessments speak of Iranian efforts to develop long range missiles, the US administration is not concerned about the possibility that Iran would attack one of its cities. The risk to the United States from an Iran armed with nuclear weapons is not viewed as a clear and present danger. The main risk for the United States is harm to its regional allies – Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states – and acts of terror acts against United States facilities around the world. The difference in the level of the threat's severity could explain, at least in part, the fact that the United States, unlike Israel, is unwilling to take far-reaching steps in order to stop Iran's nuclear activities.

Moreover, at present the United States is still in the shadow of the trauma it experienced as a result of its extended, blood-soaked, and costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that seriously affected the US economy. In both

regions, it lost many soldiers, leaving fresh scars on American society. Furthermore, wide circles in the United States note the US involvement in the 1991 Gulf War, meant to prevent Iraq, then under the rule of Saddam Hussein, from attaining nuclear weapons. The information that Iraq was developing weapons of mass destruction proved to be unfounded. Many in the United States are therefore skeptical about the “confident” assessments about Iran’s development of nuclear capabilities, and if this skepticism is justified, there would be no true cause for a US military strike against Iran.¹¹

All indications are that the American people are not prepared to supply the administration with the tailwind it needs to engage in military intervention overseas. Some say that the United States is gradually moving toward an isolationist policy. While in his address to West Point graduates in 2014 President Obama said “it is absolutely true that in the 21st century, American isolationism is not an option,” the speech also transmitted the clear message that in the future the United States would have to weigh involvement in overseas conflicts very heavily.¹² The most prominent manifestation of this was provided when the possibility of military action against Syria was discussed, in light of the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime against the civilian population. President Obama explicitly committed the United States to take military action against Syria, but before the action was set to begin, the President decided to ask for Congressional approval. Members of Congress had no intention of supporting the action, most probably due to doubts that their constituents would back them. No military action ended up being taken against Syria; instead, the emphasis shifted to removing the chemical weapons from its territory. There is disagreement among analysts and members of the administration about the nature of the agreement with Syria from the US perspective and the extent to which it can be implemented. Many feel that the President’s conduct on the matter damaged US credibility, and consequently its deterrence as well.

Finally, the time framework of the United States is vastly greater than that of Israel when it comes to the window of opportunity for use of its military capabilities. Former Defense Minister Ehud Barak coined the phrase “zone of immunity” with reference to Israel’s ability to act militarily against Iran. As time passes, he claimed, Israel will find it increasingly difficult to take military action against Iran, so that in the end, Iran may succeed in a “zone of immunity” that will prevent Israel from using the military option against it. From the US perspective, the passage of time has barely any effect on its

use of power against Iran. Its great military power and the vast weaponry at its disposal allow it to deal Iran a heavy military blow also in years to come. This is partly the reason that the United States is not behaving with the same sense of urgency that is gripping Israel.¹³

Notes

- 1 Gawdat Bahgat, "Nuclear Proliferation: The Case of Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Journal* 60, no. 3 (2006): 421-43; see especially p. 423, <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/mei/mei/2006/00000060/00000003/art00002>.
- 2 On March 4, 2012, at the annual AIPAC Policy Conference, President Obama said: "Iran's leaders should understand that I do not have a policy of containment; I have a policy to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon." See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2012/03/04/president-obama-2012-aipac-policy-conference#transcript>.
- 3 Zaki Shalom, "The Debate on a Military Option against Iran Revisited: When and by Whom?" *INSS Insight* No. 446, July 17, 2013, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=5165>.
- 4 For more on Israel's military option against Iran, see Jim Zanotti, Kenneth Katzman, Jeremiah Gertler, and Steven A. Hildreth, "Israel: Possible Military Strike Against Iran's Nuclear Facilities," *CRS Report for Congress*, September 28, 2012, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R42443.pdf>.
- 5 Jeffrey Goldberg, "Obama to Iran and Israel: 'As President of the United States, I Don't Bluff,'" *The Atlantic*, March 2, 2012.
- 6 Interview with NBC, June 2, 2014, <http://www.nbcnews.com/video/cnbc/53884579#53884579>.
- 7 Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu: 'Credible Military Option Needed against Nuclear Iran,'" *Haaretz*, July 14, 2013, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.535661>. The article cites the Prime Minister as saying that Iran is surging towards developing military nuclear capabilities, expanding and upgrading its enrichment capabilities, and concurrently developing a plutonium reactor.
- 8 Gen. Masoud Jazayeri, the Iranian deputy chief of staff, even stated that Obama's threats against Iran have become a common joke in Iran, especially among children. He dismissed Obama's statements regarding the deployment of US troops as "completely inexperienced remarks far from the reality, and these statements can be used as the joke of the year." See "Iran: Obama Threats 'A Joke'; Won't Dismantle Anything – 'That's Our Red Line,'" <http://www.breitbart.com/Breitbart-London/2014/03/06/IRAN-OBAMA-THREATS-A-JOKE-WON-T-DISMANTLE-ANYTHING-THAT-S-OUR-RED-LINE>.
- 9 In his most recent Holocaust Remembrance Day speech at Yad Vashem on April 27, 2014, Netanyahu: "On the eve of the Holocaust, there were Jews who avoided crying out to the world's nations out of fear that the fight against the Nazis would become a Jewish problem. Others believed that if they kept silent, the danger would pass. The kept silent and the disaster struck... So I ask: How is it possible that so many people failed to understand the reality? The bitter and tragic truth is this: it

is not that they did not see it. They did not want to see it. And why did they choose not to see the truth? Because they did not want to face the consequences of that truth... Twenty years earlier, the people of the West experienced a terrible trench war, a war which claimed the lives of 16 million people. Therefore, the leaders of the West operated on the basis of one axiom: avoid another confrontation at any cost, and thus they laid the foundation for the most terrible war in human history. This axiom of avoiding conflict at any cost, this axiom was adopted not only by the leaders. The people themselves, primarily the educated ones, shared it too.” See <http://www.timesofisrael.com/full-transcript-of-netanyahu-speech-for-holocaust-remembrance-day/>.

- 10 In his speech at the Saban Forum, Netanyahu said that a nuclear Iran would change the course of history and that Iran operates on the basis of lunatic principles: “They might speak English and they might make PowerPoint presentations... But when the powers behind the throne, the power on the throne is committed to a radical ideology and pursues it and talks about it again and again, then I say, ‘Beware.’” See <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2013/Pages/PM-Netanyahu-address-to-the-Saban-Forum-8-ec-2013.aspx>.
- 11 In a meeting with the amir of Kuwait in Saudi Arabia on November 21, 1990, President Bush stated: “There is a growing assessment that [Iraqi leader] Saddam Hussein is trying to get a nuclear bomb capability. In fact, this is one of the things that causes most of the concern in the United States. His CW and BW capability and potential is another matter of international concern.” See Minutes of Bilateral Meeting with the Amir of Kuwait, November 21, 1990, President George Bush Presidential Library, <http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/>.
- 12 Transcript of President Obama’s Commencement Address at West Point, May 28, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/29/us/politics/transcript-of-president-obamas-commencement-address-at-west-point>.
- 13 “Barak: ‘Iran Moving to Immunity against Attack.’” At the Davos global economic forum the Defense Minister said that Tehran is moving to a “zone of immunity” in which it will be impossible to stop its nuclear program by means of a surgical military strike.” *Ynet*, January 27, 2012, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4181657,00.html>.