



Israel Debates No. 11

15 March 2012

Israel and Iran's Nuclear Ambitions - Political or Military Action?

The international debate over how to react to Iran's nuclear program continues, reaching a new high point with Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Washington in the first week of March this year. While there is general unanimity across the West that a nuclear-armed Iran is absolutely unacceptable and would represent an enormous threat to peace and stability in the Middle East and the wider world, there is no agreement on which strategy can best prevent that from happening.

While the United States and the European Union intensified the sanctions against Iran with an oil embargo at the beginning of the year, agreed to resume negotiations over the nuclear program, and thereby evidently still hope, at least for the time being, that sanctions and diplomacy will be effective, most Israelis are just as clearly convinced that, at this point, only military action can prevent Iran from continuing its nuclear program, and thereby acquiring an atomic bomb. International sanctions are seen as an ultimately futile - and dangerous - waste of time, the more so since important countries such as Russia, China, and India are not complying with them. In Israel, the dominant view is that the international community has dealt too leniently with Iran, for too long, and closed its eyes to the threat.

In Israel, Iran is perceived as a very immediate threat for the following reasons: 1) Iran is a radical Islamist state ruled by ayatollahs; 2) time and again, its leaders reject Israel's right to exist and publicly proclaim that Israel must be wiped from the world map; 3) on account of its leaders' hatred for the West and Israel, Iran is not seen as a state that acts rationally. When geographic closeness is taken into account, it is all too understandable that Israel takes Ahmadinejad's proclamations very seriously, whereas the international community, although condemning such pronouncements, feels threatened only to a more limited extent.

While the majority of Western political leaders and experts - as well as some members of the Israeli security establishment - assume that the Iranian leadership has not yet decided whether the country wants to use nuclear technology for producing atomic weapons, the large majority of Israeli politicians and experts is apparently convinced that that is indeed the case. The Israeli debate, therefore, turns on the consideration of whether the usefulness of an air attack outweighs the possible consequences of Iranian retaliatory strikes. In particular, Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak have stressed again and again that the military option - even without international backing - may be unavoidable in order to protect Israel from the danger of a nuclear first strike and to prevent a nuclear-

armed Iran from being a patron of terrorist organizations. With reference to the prevention of a second genocide of the Jewish people, Netanyahu said that he considered a few missiles fired against Tel Aviv and other Israeli cities the lesser evil compared to an Iran that possesses nuclear technology.

Netanyahu's latest visit to Washington must be viewed against this background. Whereas the Israeli premier stressed that Israel must always be "master of its own fate," President Obama continues, for the time being, to bank on a mix of sanctions and diplomacy. He still hopes that the recently toughened sanctions against Iran will have an impact. Netanyahu can hardly object; it was Israel, after all, that demanded the sanctions be tightened. For the time being, the arrangement between Netanyahu and Obama would seem to come down to further wait-and-see, as well as closer cooperation. For now, a military strike is not in the interest of the United States. At the same time, Washington has to be concerned about being dragged into a war in case Israel does go it alone.

Polls show that the Israeli people, although feeling immediately threatened by Iran and fundamentally endorsing their premier's policies, do not support a unilateral attack against Iran. 63% oppose such a move while only 31% are in favor.

A glance at the discussion agenda for the Netanyahu-Obama meeting reveals that the subject of the Middle East conflict was not included. Instead, the discussion focused almost exclusively on Iran. With the Iran nuclear issue, Netanyahu has succeeded in going on the political offensive, after he had previously found himself on the defensive in regard to the Middle East conflict.

Within Israel, there is only isolated criticism of the government's course. Yet the few critics include several prominent members of the Israeli security establishment who consider the consequences of a military strike to be incalculable. In particular, the former chiefs of the internal and external intelligence services, Yuval Diskin and Meir Dagan, who rotated out of their respective posts last year, have expressed this view. Former Mossad chief Dagan has repeatedly appeared in public to criticize Netanyahu and Barak and warn about the danger of a regional war.

The writer David Grossman commented on this subject: "Israel is a deeply traumatized community that finds it very difficult to separate between real dangers and echoes of past traumas, and sometimes I think our prime minister fires himself up in mixing these real dangers with those echoes from the past. We are dealing with what is probably the most existential problem that the State of Israel has faced so far in its history. Most people are holding back from expressing their opinion because they have the feeling that they do not have all the necessary information."

Below, we present the analyses of two leading participants in the inner-Israeli debate over this issue:

In his analysis, **Dr. Zvi Bar'el**, Middle East correspondent for the daily newspaper Haaretz, concludes, first, that Iran is indeed a rational actor, even if its rationality does not accord with Western conceptions. He outlines why Iran is perceived by the majority of people and political leaders in Israel as an existential threat and why the debate no longer revolves around whether but when and how an Israeli military operation should take place. He sees Israel trapped within its own reasoning and analyzes the possible military, political, and economic consequences of an Israeli military strike. The USA, he

believes, is stuck in a strategic dilemma. Russia and China are newly influential actors in the region. Bar'el outlines how difficult to calculate, and how risk-filled, the consequences of a military operation against Iran would be. In the end, he concludes that diplomatic and political means should continue to be used to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear threat as long as the military intentions and aims of the Iranian leadership cannot be unambiguously proven.

Prof. Efraim Inbar of Bar Ilan University, on the other hand, believes there is almost no remaining leeway for diplomacy and politics. He assumes that Israel will soon act militarily. For him, as for most of the Israeli security and military establishment, it is beyond doubt that Iran is striving for the atomic bomb and that the West's efforts to prevent the Iranian leadership from doing so through sanctions and political means have failed. Since Iran's leaders time and again declare their desire to eradicate Israel, there is no doubt in Israel that they would employ nuclear weapons to that end. Prof. Inbar also concludes that Iran, once in possession of the bomb, would have no scruples about passing it on to allied terrorist groups such as Hamas or Hizbollah. Such a scenario is absolutely intolerable for Israel and it is therefore imperative to act. In contrast to the gullible West, Israel is directly threatened and cannot depend on President Obama, whom Inbar sees as politically weak and prone to illusions about the rough realities of the Middle East. In the end, Inbar argues, the country is on its own but, as history shows, it can achieve this goal.

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Herzliya, 15 March 2012

Yes, we can. So can Iran

By Dr. Zvi Bar'el

It is a "what if" situation that the world public diplomacy is entrenched in. What if Iran is left to complete its nuclear program? What if Israel attacks Iran in the current phase? What if Iran retaliates and how would it retaliate? Moreover, what if Iran is to build a nuclear bomb? Even after the meeting between Prime Minister Netanyahu and Barack Obama, it is still unclear what are the Israeli or the American policies. What did Obama mean when he said that "we won't tolerate a nuclear Iran"? Did he suggest that developing nuclear technology and enriching Uranium would be tolerated? Did he mean that only a nuclear weapon would be the red line for the US?

Judging from published leaks and from almost daily declarations, mainly by Israeli politicians, it seems that we are well beyond the phase of academic or strategic deliberations. Rather, the question is when, and not if, Israel will attack Iran. We are certain that Iran is aiming at building military nuclear capabilities, and we are quite sure that Israel can absorb any Iranian retaliatory strike without suffering too many casualties, "not even 500 casualties" as defense minister Ehud Barak had maintained.

Yet, it is not too late to consider the premises that are leading Israel to be so adamant in its hot pursuit of Iran, and to add some question marks in front of the paradigms that dictate Israel's policy.

Three accumulative foundations comprise the perception of the Iranian threat, apart from its technological capabilities. First, it is a radically religious Shiite state, that is run by religious scholars, an "Ayatollahs' State" as it is referred to in the West. Secondly, it is declaring loudly that the state of Israel is a non-entity and that it should be wiped off the world's map. And, thirdly, given its type of leadership and its expressed hatred to Israel in particular and the US in general, it cannot be considered as a rational state, hence, Iran, is dangerous because it is irrational and unpredictable state.

It is not within the scope of this paper to analyze Iran's rationality, or to make comparisons between the "state of the Ayatollahs" and other dangerous states like Pakistan, that possess proven military capabilities. However, since rationality has become a strategic scale for Iran's intentions, it would be useful to quote the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey. In an interview to CNN he said that, *"None of that is acceptable to us, or to our way of thinking and our way of being rational, but it does fit their pattern of thinking and a 30-year history of conduct, so my view of this is we can't afford to underestimate our potential adversaries by writing them off as irrational."*

So, there is a "Western rationality" and an "Iranian rationality", if so, the important question is not what are the ingredients of the Iranian rationality but rather, according to Dempsey, how to reconcile the Iranian rationality with that of the West. This is where an inherent contradiction in the West's and Israel's perceptions of Iran is embedded. The argument against Iran's rationality claims that if Iran is a rational state, it should have already been convinced by the sanctions and by the threats to attack it, that its nuclear policy puts it in harm's way. Only a "non-rational" state would pursue such a policy, so why would Dempsey still consider Iran as rational? Farther, there is an agreement between the Israeli intelligence community and the American administration that Iran has not decided yet to build nuclear military devices. Why is it, then, that a "non rational" state would declare that it is not intending to build nuclear weapon, why, after being so open and so proud in demonstrating its technological capabilities, it stops short of introducing the ultimate threat? Why isn't Iran behaving like Pakistan, India, North Korea or Israel?

If Iran is indeed a rational state, why is it that the "rational" threats on it do not produce the wished for results, farther, if it is rational, why is it still perceived as a menace?

One reason is that states, western or eastern, religious or secular, consider national pride – however they define it -as an essential component of their rationality. Occupying Afghanistan and Iraq, and the continuation of the Israeli occupation in the

West Bank, are only two examples of an irrational behavior by otherwise rational states, while from a subjective point of view those acts serve an important national or ideological interest. They are rational from their internal point of view.

In that context, it is easy to understand why Iran is striving to possess nuclear technologies while being very cautious to stress its non-military purpose. Demonstrating its technological achievements, while being under sanctions for more than 30 years, and emerging as a regional superpower that can challenge the mainly pro-American Arab Middle East, is part of Iran's national pride, part of its rationality.

However, it is not the Iranian rationality, or lack of, that will determine Israel's and the US reaction to its nuclear program. Questions like feasibility, retaliation, "collateral damage" in Israel, Arab states' reaction, political pressures inside Israel and the US, and of course, Iran's manipulative reaction, will dictate the next stage.

While Israel calms down its public concerning its military capabilities to attack Iran, there are deep concerns about the capability of the Israeli public to absorb an Iranian retaliatory strike. The affects of the Lebanon war in 2006, when the barrages of Katyusha rockets by Hizballah had created damage, havoc and put the country to halt are still fresh in the public memory. Barak's estimates that "not even 500 casualties" will incur by Israel are largely dismissed. The government's argument that a nuclear Iran is an existential threat is taken at face value almost without any debate. It is interesting to see to what extent the public and Israeli politician are adopting the official line, even when security icons, like the former head of the Mossad, Meir Dagan, or the former head of Shabak, Yuval Diskin, are arguing against an attack. In no time, these figures have become "outsiders", who are accused of being driven by political motivation.

The core of the Israeli debate is not about the necessity to attack, but whether Israel should attack alone or with the US. Moreover, if the US refrains from attacking Iran, should Israel deal with the

threat alone? It should be noticed that by posing the question of cooperation, once again, Israel is sure of its capability and necessity to act alone, yet, it weighs its existential interest against the interests of the US. By doing so Israel realizes that, its survival depends not only on demolishing the Iranian threat, but also on having a friendly US on its side the day after. Given the uncertainty of a successful strike on Iran and the debatable damage that Israel might incur, it is indeed a tough dilemma.

This dilemma has a tactical aspect to it, as it concerns a feasible timetable for the attack. The Israeli assumption is that there is a "window of time" until Iran would transfer its Uranium enrichment machinery into new bomb-resistant locations. However, the Israeli "window" might clash with the American "window" that demands more time for the sanctions to take effect.

This "clash of windows- of- time" locks Israel in a paradox that it has always strived to evade. Israel's policy has been from the outset, to persuade the world that a nuclear Iran is a threat to Europe and the Arab Middle East as much as it is for Israel and the US. By doing so Israel was almost trapped in its own arguments. It was when the US had tried to convince to make peace with the Palestinians in order to establish an all-Arab coalition against Iran using Israel's own argument for an Arab coalition against Iran. This was of course a flawed argument, because Arab states are suspicious of Iran, with or without peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Farther, Arab nations have already decided in 2002 to grant Israel a "security belt" if Israel would withdraw from all the occupied territories. The question of Iran was not on the table then, and even Syria, a staunch ally of Iran signed the Arab initiative. That said, Iran is perceived as a menace to Arab states, not so much because of its nuclear infrastructure or the probability that it will develop nuclear weapons, as much as it is from its perceived capability to cause havoc and topple regimes. However, the fact is that Saudi Arabia is more troubled by radical home grown organizations, Sunnis by the way, than from Iranian involvement in its affairs. Even Iran's deep involvement in Iraq is for a large extent balanced by Saudi Arabia's

involvement and economic influence in the Sunni and Kurdish areas of Iraq. An involvement which is a matter of concern for Iran, also in case Assad's regime falls, as Iran claims, and it is probably right, that Saudi Arabia finances the Syrian opposition.

The result then was that Israel had managed successfully to evade the peace process thus detaching it from the Iranian issue.

Now, once again Israel is trapped in its own argument. By promoting the case of attacking Iran, Israel has become the focus of the international debate (and deep concern) that perceives an Israeli attack on Iran as a threat to stability in the region and perhaps to the world at large. It seems now that the Israeli attack is perhaps as dangerous as a nuclear Iran. Suffice is to watch the American efforts to restrain Israel or at least to convince her that she cannot launch such an operation alone.

While it is difficult to guess Iran's reaction to an Israeli attack, or the extent of the damage that Israel will incur, it is probably easier to estimate what ramifications such an attack can have on the region and its relations with the US.

With new regimes coming to power in the "new" Middle East, the US is trying to navigate through contradicting policies in order to ensure its foothold in the area. While Iraq is cracking down, Yemen is developing into a new battlefield between different factions, Libya is controlled only partly by its government, and the Syrian regime is still holding up, let alone the unstable situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan, a new map of influence is starting to emerge. Russia, and to a certain extent, China, are emerging as important players, especially because of their relations with Iran, Iraq and Syria. While the US is still maintaining its good relations with the Gulf states and with Egypt, one cannot ignore the possible impact of an attack on Iran on these relations. The premise that most Arab states will side with the US and Israel, should an attack on Iran take place, could not be taken for granted. In an era when public opinion in many states of the

region matters more than the regimes policies, one can imagine that an attack on a "Muslim country" would create a shift of balance – especially if Israel is involved – and that the Western military intervention would be considered as a continuation to the failed intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to explain to the Arab publics why is the US ready to interfere militarily to eliminate a nuclear threat against Israel, while it is unwilling to do so to save of the Syrian people.

This apparent contradicting policy is not just a moral dilemma. It might pull the carpet from underneath the US' fragile status in the region. As a result, the US would find it much more difficult to mobilize the Arab support in many other important fields, which are important also to Israel. Farther, such an attack will definitely have its economic implications, especially on the price of oil. The question that the US and Israel will have to face then will be: to what extent the public in the US and Europe will be ready to pay a much higher price for its fuel because of a war that Israel had "initiated"? Will these publics be ready to understand the existential threat on Israel and pay for it? Alternatively, would they demand to abandon Israel's interests, or at least punish it for the economic disaster that they have incurred?

In conclusion, I would argue that while Iran's nuclear military capabilities, or aspirations, are yet to be proven, the diplomatic process cannot and should not be relinquished. For a nuclear threat to be tenable, it requires a proven capability and a motivation. While the focus now is to prevent Iran's capability, its motivation is perceived as given. However, this perceived motivation has to be addressed now, especially if sanctions prove to be futile.

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Meeting the Iranian Nuclear Challenge – Israel on the Verge of Action

Prof. Efraim Inbar

Beginning with Yitzhak Rabin in the 1990s, all Israeli prime ministers have tried to alert the West to the dangers of a nuclear Iran. Two decades later, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu shares his predecessors' dire assessment of a nuclear armed Iran, but he faces an Iran with a much more advanced nuclear program, dangerously close to weaponization. Moreover, as the Arab world is in turmoil and Iran is an ascendant regional power, Israel's strategic environment becomes more problematic than before.

The Dangers of a Nuclear Iran

Israel has argued that a nuclear Iran would be a "game changer" in the Middle East with security repercussions even beyond it. It would generate nuclear proliferation in the region as states such as Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia would hardly resist adopting similar nuclear postures, thereby turning a multi-polar nuclear Middle East into a strategic nightmare. A nuclear armed Iran would strengthen its hegemony in the strategic energy sector by its mere location along the oil-rich Persian Gulf and the Caspian basin. It will also result in the West's loss of the Central Asian states, which will either gravitate toward Iran or try to secure a nuclear umbrella with Russia or China, countries much closer to the region. An emboldened Tehran, after nuclearization, will become more active in supporting radical Shiite elements in Iraq and agitating those communities in the Arabian Gulf states. Moreover, since Tehran is a central backer of terrorist organizations such as Hizballah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, it may be reckless enough to transfer several nuclear bombs to such proxy organizations, which will have no moral constraints on detonating a nuclear device in a European or American harbor. Iran's nuclear program – coupled with further improvements in Iranian missiles – would initially put most European capitals, and

eventually North American, within range of a potential Iranian attack. Considering the many statements by the US president and European leaders against the crossing of the nuclear threshold by Iran, an Iranian nuclear bomb will constitute above all a terrible Western strategic failure, affecting its fortunes everywhere.

The Feeble International Response

The gullible West questioned Israel's assertion that Iran has a military nuclear program and engaged in a futile prolonged diplomatic dialogue with Iran in order to establish the parameters of its nuclear program and pathetically hope to prevent nuclearization by diplomacy. Similarly, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), an institution which was supposed to supervise the Iranian nuclear program, refused for years to call a spade a spade, playing into the Iranian negotiating strategy designed to gain time in order to present the world with a nuclear fait accompli. Eventually, it dawned upon Western capitals that diplomacy had run its course, as Israel has argued for some time, and feeble economic sanctions were imposed upon Iran to change its nuclear policy. These sanctions failed to elicit any change in Iranian nuclear behavior. Indeed, only in November 2011 did the IAEA publish a report voicing its concern that Iranian activities do not easily fit with those of a civilian program. In January 2012, a new set of more stringent economic sanctions were imposed by Western states.

But Israel's leaders fear that the international response is unlikely to impact Iranian policy since the nuclear program is so advanced. Unfortunately, Israel's admonitions about the nature of the Iranian nuclear program have proved true. While Israel's analysis of the ramifications of a nuclear Iran has gradually become more acceptable in the international community, a large part of the Western strategic community, particularly the European side of the Atlantic, views Iran as "a rational actor" that still can be dissuaded by economic sanctions. Moreover, even if Tehran gets the bomb, it is argued that "it can be contained and deterred," rejecting the "alarmist" view from Jerusalem.

Israeli Perceptions of the Situation

Israel is increasingly exasperated with Western attitudes for several reasons. First, Israel does not believe that when Iran is so close to acquiring the bomb sanctions are useful. Indeed, the history of economic sanctions in the international arena shows many instances where such sanctions were successfully circumvented. Many states, such as China, Russia, India, Turkey and even pro-Western states indicated their reluctance to cooperate in US-inspired sanctions. Moreover, the literature on economic sanctions documents examples of determined regimes being unaffected by economic difficulties. Cuba and Iraq come easily to mind. Indeed, the belief that sanctions could impact Iranian nuclear endeavors underestimates the significance of a nuclear arsenal for the current Iranian regime. The stakes of the ruling elite in Iran in the nuclear program are inextricably connected to its political and even physical survival. The bomb is a guarantee for its own future. Destabilizing the regime of a nuclear state, which may lead to chronic domestic instability, civil war, or disintegration, is a more risky enterprise than undermining a non-nuclear regime. The lesson that Middle Eastern elites have learned from the Western campaign to oust Muammar Gaddafi, who had given up his nuclear program due to Western pressure, is that states should actually stick to their nuclear programs. Otherwise, they run the risk of being destabilized by the West.

Unfortunately, American statements that all options are on the table, pointing out the availability of military action if sanctions fail, do not impress the Iranians. The perception among most Middle Easterners, both foes and friends of the US, is that President Barack Obama is extremely weak and hardly understands the harsh realities of the Middle East, and that American use of force is highly unlikely. Such evaluations seem to be quite realistic. In any case, perceived American weakness undermines the chances of economic sanctions being effective. Actually, the US' recent intense diplomatic activity – seemingly an attempt to convince Israel to delay military action – similarly

conveys fears of regional escalation, which strengthens the Iranian hand. President Obama cannot convince a skeptic Netanyahu that the US can be trusted to eliminate the Iranian nuclear danger, particularly when the American define the “red line” a nuclear weapon, when for Israel it is “capability to build a nuclear weapon.” Moreover, Israel can hardly trust an American government because past American commitments to a variety of international actors, including Israel, have been violated. Indeed, the meeting between the two leaders (March 5, 2012) underscored the different perspectives, as well as the Israeli insistence that on such issues Israel has the sovereign right to act on its own.

Second, Israel's threat perception is much higher than in the West, particularly after the 2011 Middle East turmoil. Most significant for Israel is the deterioration of the situation in Egypt, putting at risk Israel's peace treaty with its neighbor – a pillar of its national security. The rise of Islamists in several states in the region, a welcome development by Iran, indicates deterioration in Israel's security environment. Actually, all Middle East leaders share realpolitik lenses for viewing international affairs and tend to think in terms of worst case scenarios. Moreover, the Israeli leadership, with a Jewish prism to international relations, is unlikely to take a nonchalant view of existential threats to the Jewish state. Israeli fears have been fed by explicit statements by Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and by its supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who advocated the destruction of the Jewish state. Jewish history has taught Israel that such genocidal threats should not be dismissed. Indeed, Israel's margins of security in case Iran goes nuclear are much narrower than the more distant West. Its risks are greater if those that advocate deterrence and containment far away prove to be wrong.

Third, the strategic community in Israel, with few exceptions, questions the possibility of establishing stable deterrence between Israel and Iran, modeled on the relationship between the two superpowers during the Cold War. Mutual deterrence between

two nuclear protagonists is never automatic. Maintaining a second-strike capability is an ongoing process, which is inherently uncertain and ambiguous. Moreover, before an initial "effective" second-strike capability is achieved, a nuclear race may create the fear of a first-strike nuclear attack, which might itself trigger a nuclear exchange.

In a nuclear multipolar environment, following nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, achieving stable deterrence would be even more difficult. Middle East powers would also have to establish early warning systems searching in all directions, which are very complicated, particularly when the distances between enemies are so small. The influence of haste and the need to respond quickly can have dangerous consequences. In addition, the rudimentary nuclear forces in the region would likely be prone to accidents and mistakes.

While it can be argued that Middle East leaders behave rationally, many of them engage in "brinkmanship" leading to miscalculation. Going after the Saudi ambassador in Washington is just one example of Iranian recklessness. Even of greater consequence, the Iranians' sensitivity to costs and their attitudes to human life hardly conform to Western values. Iranian leaders have said that they are ready to pay a heavy price for the destruction of the Jewish state, anticipating only minimal damages in the Muslim world.

Therefore, the strategic calculus in Jerusalem indicates that the prevention of a nuclear Iran is very important and urgent, justifying risks and considerable costs. Even a few years setback would be an achievement in delaying a very threatening situation. As a small state with small margins of security, Israel has no choice but to adopt a short term perspective. In contrast to the solution-oriented Western strategic culture, Israel's approach is fundamentally different, emphasizing its ability to cope with insoluble problems. This also means that Israel is reconciled to the possibility that it may need to act in a similar way in a few years' time to delay a more threatening situation. The phrase "mowing the grass" best depicts Israeli strategic thinking.

Exaggerated Fears of Regional Repercussions

The feeling in Israel is that the fears of regional repercussions from an Israeli military strike are exaggerated. Iran's retaliation capabilities are limited. Iranian long-range missiles (with conventional warheads) can hardly do much damage in Israel because its ballistic missile defense system (Arrow-2) can intercept most of them. Similarly, the Iranian terrorist threat is basically manageable. The seeming Iranian ineptness in its February 2012 terrorist campaign against Israeli targets in Azerbaijan, Georgia, India and Thailand clearly shows the operational limitations of Iranian terror capabilities.

Iranian proxies Hamas and Hizballah, which border Israel, are Iran's best retaliatory card since they possess thousands of missiles that can reach most of Israel. While most of them lack precision, they can inflict serious damage on Israel. Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system can only partially neutralize the effect of these missiles. Estimates of potential casualties and damage vary, but when compared to the effects of a nuclear strike they seem reasonable. Moreover, due to their proximity, Hizballah and Hamas are vulnerable to Israeli conventional counterattacks and invasion. Furthermore, the fact that these organizations are responsible for civilians under their control makes them somewhat deterrable. Israeli threats of massive retaliation have some deterrent value. Above all, taking into consideration Israel's decapitation methods, the leadership takes great personal risks when exacting a high cost from Israel.

Iranian threats to American targets in the Middle East or to the freedom of navigation in the Hormuz Strait hardly enter into the Israeli strategic calculus. Yet, if Iran miscalculates and decides foolishly to confront the US along the lines mentioned it would only please Israel as Iran would become susceptible to American retaliation. The US can retake the Hormuz Strait in maximum two weeks. A temporary stoppage in the flow of Gulf oil or a surge in energy prices is something that most states can deal with by using their strategic oil reserves.

In addition, the political repercussions of a successful Israeli military strike are likely to be minimal. Most regional actors will clap in private, while denouncing Israeli "aggression." Western capitals might express "regret" at Israeli military action, feeling relieved that Israel spared them the need to do something meaningful about the Iranian nuclear hot potato. Yet, international hypocrisy hardly has any effect on Israel, which has been subjected to such abuses in the past.

The Debate in Jerusalem

The current debate in Jerusalem is not over the utility of sanctions. Nobody seriously believes that economic pressure is likely to change Iranian policy. The deliberations are over whether to allow more time for covert operations or to initiate a preemptive strike against Iran's nuclear installations.

Israeli covert operations have slowed down the progress of the Iranians in the nuclear and missile theaters. Explosions in sensitive places have taken place and several key personnel in the nuclear project have been eliminated. There are important voices in Israel, including former Mossad Chief Meir Dagan, that advocate for continuing these efforts and refraining, for now, from a preemptive strike. Others, such as former Mossad Chief Danny Yatom, point out the limitations of such an approach, which in his view leaves only military means to stop the Iranian race to the bomb. Israel's defense establishment obviously understands the difficulties in carrying out a military strike against key nuclear installations, primarily the nuclear enrichment facilities. Yet, Israel's Air Force has been preparing for this mission for several years and seems ready to execute a risky operation. Military history shows that operational ingenuity and willingness to pay a heavy price leaves no target impregnable.

Yet, as everybody knows, things can go wrong and therefore this is not an easy decision to make. An unexpected muscular American move may spare Israel's government the deliberations, but there is

little hope that such a scenario will materialize, once again leaving the Israelis to go it alone.

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