

# Israel's Military Option

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Washington finally made the offer Tehran has been waiting to hear since 2006: to negotiate a peaceful halt to Iran's nuclear program without any preconditions. In 2006, Iran was willing to temporarily freeze uranium enrichment for direct negotiation with the United States, since negotiations would have awarded the regime a great deal of legitimacy. Two years prior to that, in 2004, Iran had not dared to enrich uranium and had shelved its military plan. Today, the opening conditions are different. Washington courts Tehran while Iran declares its readiness to talk about any important strategic topic with the United States separately and with the P5 + 1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—and Germany). Nevertheless, it does not consider “its natural right to develop nuclear energy” a topic worthy of discussion and certainly is not ready to freeze any activity during the talks.

How did this erosion happen? When did Iran acquiring or not acquiring nuclear weapons capability depend more on a political decision rather than overcoming a technical challenge? Is there still a real chance to block Iran? And is the United States ready to take the right measures and risks to prevent a very dangerous situation—a Middle East under an Iranian nuclear umbrella?

## Iran's Strategy

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Despite the official Iranian position, which holds that Tehran is developing a nuclear capability for peaceful purposes alone, it is clear that Iran has a clear interest in attaining nuclear weapons. This is not only the position of the regime, but also largely represents what appears to be correct and just in the eyes of majority of the Iranian population.

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In the eyes of Iran, there are four justifiable reasons for its possession of nuclear weapons. First is for them to serve as a tool of self-defense. The 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War resulted in massive devastation. Hundreds of surface-to-surface missiles were fired at Iran, leveling cities and killing thousands of civilians. It is clear that if Iran had nuclear weapons then, such a thing would not have happened. Iran, therefore, views nuclear weapons as the ultimate deterrent. Second, nuclear weapons will inevitably protect the current regime and deter U.S. attempts of regime change. Third, nuclear weapons will certainly increase Iran's prestige in the region. Because of the size of the country, its population, history, and strategic importance, Iran feels that it is the equivalent of India or Pakistan, and does not understand why it must suffer from discriminatory attitudes against nuclear weapons possession. And finally, Iran desires the capability for religious reasons. In the eyes of Iranians, everyone has nuclear weapons: Christians, Hindus (e.g., India), Buddhists (in other words, China), Jews (Israel), and even Sunni Muslims (Pakistan). Why is it just the Shi'ites that are not allowed to have nuclear weapons?

**Iran cannot be politically and economically isolated without Russia fully cooperating.**

The willingness to acquire nuclear weapons does not mean that Iran will attempt to obtain such weapons as soon as possible. For now, Iran is content with having the capability to obtain weapons within a relatively short period of time, as long as such capability is kept under “constructive ambiguity” (the world knows it but is not required to make official statements). To date, Iran has succeeded

in achieving three steps along the way: It possesses sufficient quantities of raw uranium; it has managed to convert it to uranium hexafluoride (UF-6); and most importantly, it has managed to enrich uranium to the four percent purity level (in other words, Iran now has low enriched uranium [LEU]). Enriching uranium is the main technological challenge. Iran currently possesses about 1.5 tons of enriched uranium, sufficient to make one or two bombs.

In order to have military nuclear capability, Iran needs to take four more steps that can be performed simultaneously. The first involves continuing to enrich uranium up to 90 percent (highly enriched uranium or HEU). This is a minor technological challenge since, from the moment enrichment activity is controlled, all that is required is to continue until the needed level is reached. The second step is to turn the enriched material into its solid form, which again is a relatively simple process. The third step is to renew the weapons plan: to assemble the enriched, solid material into a bomb by creating an arming mechanism and activation. Iran officially denies that it has such a plan, though

its actions since 2003 and the knowledge it has obtained make it reasonable to assume that such a plan exists. It would take no more than 6 to 12 months to produce a bomb from the moment it renews the weapons plan. The fourth step is to produce missiles capable of carrying atomic bombs. Probably the Shahab-3 and certainly Shahab-4 missiles are built with nuclear warhead capability. Iran, therefore, can technically have nuclear weapons capability in a short period of time, since all four of these steps are solvable.

It is worth mentioning the differences between the assessment of the intelligence agencies of Israel, the United Kingdom, and the United States regarding the renewal of the weapons plan. The Americans, according to the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate report, claim that the program was terminated in 2003 and that there is no evidence that it has been renewed since then.<sup>1</sup> The British argue that this program was renewed in 2005, while the Israelis claim that the program was probably kept alive all this time, and that there is a lack of a “smoking gun.”

Iran can currently choose between three courses of actions. First, it can remain at this threshold capability of nuclear weapons and not proceed. Second, it can covertly (and slowly) advance with its nuclear bomb capabilities while performing various scams until it feels safe to expose the existence of nuclear weapons (as Pakistan did at the time). Or, it can break the rules, expel the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors, and attempt to overtly produce an atomic bomb as quickly as possible. It can safely be assumed, however, that Iran will continue to enrich uranium up to the maximum permitted level for peaceful purposes (4–5 percent), but not hurry to build a bomb, settling to create the conditions to make them in a short period of time.

## **The U.S. Strategy**

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President George W. Bush had a simplistic approach to the issue: players in the global arena were viewed in black and white. Iran belonged to the dark side, and was part of the “axis of evil.” As such, Iran was unworthy of any gesture from the United States and direct dialog was out of the question. Until February 2005, the United States resisted any negotiation between three European (E-3) countries—France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—and Iran. Since that time, Washington has “allowed” these countries to negotiate with Iran, but made it clear that it did not believe such negotiations could lead to effective results.

The United States views Iran as a serial transgressor of UN resolutions and IAEA decisions. Thus, the only “right” thing to do is to demand that Iran abide by those resolutions—in particular, those resolutions that demand halting the enrichment of uranium. If Iran continues to refuse, then sanctions should be intensified against it. Under the Bush administration, it was also clear that if

sanctions were ineffective, military action would be a possibility. The Bush administration's greatest mistake was to view the Iranian nuclear program as a stand-alone matter and not acknowledge that a successful campaign against the Iranian nuclear threat requires a broader policy.

### **The Russian Linchpin**

Another mistake the United States made was failing to get Russia on its side. Iran cannot be politically and economically isolated without Russia fully cooperating for three reasons. First, Russia has widespread economic ties with Iran. Second, the two rising powers, China and India, refrain from participating in sanctions on Iran because both have interests in the country. Yet, both tend to hide behind Russia at the UN and other forums. As long as Russia does not join sanctions against Iran, China and India will not either, despite U.S. pressure to do so. European countries, such as France and Italy, also feel that halting their investments in Iran will be impractical. Without Russia, therefore, the United States will have little success. And third, Russia is the supplier of the nuclear reactor in Bushehr, indicating that Iran needs to continue ties with Russia.

What is Russia's policy toward Iran? Is Russia interested in Iran having nuclear weapons? The answer is no. Russia, similar to the United States, prefers that Iran not possess nuclear weapons. Unlike the United States, the issue is a low priority on Russia's list of strategic interests. Russia is, after all, geographically close to countries that possess nuclear weapons (e.g., China, India and Pakistan). A nuclear-armed Iran is not frightening to Russia. Furthermore, Russia has its own list of priorities. First is to ensure that Putin's regime—a kind of enlightened dictatorship—is maintained and remains stable. The Russian regime cannot, therefore, take criticism from the West on lack of democratization or inappropriate measures in Chechnya. Second is to ensure that the former republics of the Soviet Union remain under Russian influence and not enter NATO or the European Union. Third is to ensure that Russia's crude oil and natural gas reserves serve as leverage to improve the Russian economy—a necessary condition for the regime's stability—and to establish powerful political influence, at least in Eastern Europe. And the fourth interest is that Russia return to a superpower status equal to the United States. Consequently, it would not tolerate unilateral U.S. steps that would damage Russian prestige.

Russia perceived U.S. policy during the Bush administration as deliberately harming these important interests. As long as this was the perspective in Moscow, no cooperation could be expected from Russia. In other words, in order to isolate Iran, meaningful cooperation with Russia is needed. As long as the United States does not consider these Russian interests, the effort to put together a reliable international coalition against Iran will fail.

A good example of the detachment between Russia and the United States is the latter's response to Russia's spring 2004 proposal designed to mitigate, if not solve, the Iranian issue. At that time, the Iranians dared not provoke the UN and the international community by openly enriching uranium. The Russian proposal claimed that if Iran requires nuclear energy for electricity production, it could be offered a plant for enriching uranium and turning the material into fuel rods. While the plant would be jointly owned by Iran and Russia, it would be based in Russia so that only Russia would have control of the technology. In addition, the spent fuel would be returned to Russia to prevent Iran from converting the enriched material to a bomb. Russia had also stated that if Iran rejected the deal, Moscow would agree to cooperate with the West and add pressure on Iran. The Russians, however, added two conditions. First, Russia wanted a commitment from the West—mainly from France—that no country would compete with Russia to provide the supply for nuclear reactors or any nuclear technology to Iran. Second, Russia wanted the proposal to get full support from the United States and become the agreed solution to solve the dispute with Iran.

Neither Europe nor the United States, however, was willing to give Russia what it asked for. The United States blatantly replied that it did not matter what the specific suggestion is—the willingness to offer the Iranians “something” was unacceptable to Washington. Consequently, Iran took Russia up on its offer and a uranium enrichment plant was activated in Natanz by the end of that year.

The U.S. policy was conveyed in rigid rhetoric and was completely ineffective. It is unclear whether there was a clear strategy behind the rigid declarations. Had the United States expected regime change in Iran? Had it hoped that Iran would unconditionally surrender to the pressure of sanctions and relinquish its nuclear plan? Was it trying to draw Iran into a course of military collision? Was there any settlement that could satisfy the United States? It seemed that the U.S. government had no clear means or solutions to accomplish what it wanted.

Apparently, the U.S. government had not made a clear distinction between public diplomacy and policy. The purpose of public diplomacy is to explain that you are right, and are one of the good guys, while the other party belongs to the “evil” camp. Contrary to public relations, the goal of policy is to force various players to take actions that suit your interests. It seems that the United States had not clearly determined its interests and the required steps to achieve them.

**It is important that a state like Iran not control the enrichment technology.**

It should be noted, in this context, that an “interest” is not only a desirable goal, but also something important enough that you are willing to pay a price to achieve it. Despite all the above-mentioned mistakes, one thing was right and consistent in U.S. policy: the unwillingness to agree to any level of enriched uranium by Iran. The United States was unwilling to swallow the Iranian story that uranium enrichment for peaceful purposes is permitted under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and constitutes Iran’s legitimate right.

The rationale behind the U.S. unwillingness to recognize this declared right was simple. Nuclear weapons production comprises several stages. The most technologically complex is overcoming the challenge in enrichment itself. From the moment the process modestly succeeds—level of enrichment at 4 percent—it is not a difficult task to repeat this process continuously until the material is enriched up to 90 percent or more, a sufficient level to produce a bomb. In order to safeguard a “buffer zone,” it is important that a state like Iran not control the enrichment technology. This by itself could ensure Iran would not be able to produce a bomb. All IAEA and UN resolutions reflect the international support the Bush administration had created on this matter.

### **Obama’s First Steps**

President Barack Obama’s reassessment of the Iranian issue has led to two insights, which are very different from those held by the previous administration. The first is that the Iranian nuclear problem should be solved in a larger regional context. The second is that it is impossible to convince Iran to agree to any step by using sticks only; carrots must be used as well. Furthermore, carrots and sticks should be big enough to help lead Iran to make the right decision. These two correct conclusions constitute the foundation for positive policy change that could lead to the cessation, or at least suspension, of the Iranian nuclear project. The new administration, however, has made six grave mistakes.

The first is that the United States implied its willingness (e.g., Obama’s speech in Cairo<sup>2</sup> and other remarks) to agree to enrichment of uranium by Iran as long as it is for peaceful purposes, effectively making the first concession without waiting for an Iranian response to the U.S. approach to engage without any preconditions in the first place. Contrary to his predecessor, neither the president nor his advisors explicitly stated that Iran should not enrich uranium. Iran, therefore, is rewarded for blatantly enriching uranium in defiance of resolutions long made by international institutions. Furthermore, when serious negotiations begin with Iran, the right to enrich uranium up to a level of 5 percent will not be a subject for negotiation anymore.

The second mistake is overrating cooperation with moderate Arab countries and being willing to reward these countries, especially Egypt and Saudi Arabia, in return. Curbing Iranian influence is already the most important national interest

of these countries today. As Iranian influence increased, internal stability in these countries would be undermined. Thus, no compensation is required for them on this issue today. The United States could, for example, demand that Saudi Arabia commit to increase its oil sales to India and China but not to combine such a demand with an irrelevant matter like progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiation.

The third mistake goes back to Russia. Obama changed the tone regarding Russia and even made a far-reaching decision to cancel the missile plan in Poland and the Czech Republic. While taking confidence-building measures toward Russia is a positive development, the Obama administration has also repeated its predecessor's mistakes. Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Georgia in July 2009 serves as a good example. While in Georgia, Biden declared his support for Georgia's aspiration to join NATO, even though Russia and Georgia were at war a year ago. Moreover, he emphasized his support for Georgia against Russia on the future of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He also committed to enhance military assistance to Georgia. The Russians were furious, as expected. It is unclear how the United States benefited from these declarations, but the damage is obvious.

The fourth mistake is the lack of clear leadership regarding the process. If the United States is willing to directly negotiate with Iran and pay a political price, it should have prevented a situation where Javier Solana, the high representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy in the EU, hurried to set the timing and framework for the discussions to begin on October 1, 2009. The Iranians are experts in sensing vulnerability within a system and the divisions that exist within its members. They were quick to declare their willingness to negotiate with any international forum, including the P5+1, on many issues except nuclear enrichment. Iran views its nuclear enrichment capability as an irreversible fact, constituting Iran's full right to control this technology for peaceful purposes. As far as they are concerned, the nuclear issue can be discussed but only in the context of a world free of nuclear weapons. Moreover, the exposure of the new enrichment plant near the city of Qom, which somewhat embarrassed Iran and especially its president, did not change its resolute position that it is allowed to enrich uranium. The United States should have foreseen such a development and should have coordinated with the other members of the meeting in Geneva that the negotiations with Iran include several topics, including the Iranian nuclear plan.

The fifth mistake was taking the military option off the table. Several U.S. officials made contradicting remarks, but the president, in contrast with his

**The Obama administration has correctly reassessed two insights, but made six grave mistakes.**

predecessor, had not even implied that the military option might be considered. If the United States had wanted to create a reliable military option that could be carried out in a short period of time, such a decision would have many indicators similar to those seen before the war in Iraq. The fact that there are no such signs implies that there is no real chance that the United States would take military action against Iran. The Iranians understand this well, and in turn, it has boosted their confidence.

The last mistake is about North Korea. The Iranian interpretation of the lack of a U.S. response to North Korean provocations is that the United States is reluctant for any kind of confrontation. The perception in Tehran, therefore, is that the United States will seek to reach a deal at almost in any price.

It seems that the United States has two possible courses of action. Both include a willingness to negotiate with Iran without preconditions, but they differ in their approach to confrontation.

#### **Option A: Make Iran Choose**

In this scenario, the United States would carry out negotiations with Iran, with or without the P5+1, and would not have any preconditions. Iran would be allowed to use nuclear technology for peaceful purposes and would be allowed to enrich uranium as well. Sanctions against Iran would be halted. For its part, Iran would have to make several commitments. IAEA inspectors would be brought back in and meet the standards which were set in 2003. Furthermore, Iran would have to comply with a list of technical demands.

First, Iran would have to transfer the enriched material to a third country, such as Russia, and will have to agree for it to be converted into fuel rods (once that conversion is made, it is difficult to revert back to the enriched state). If Iran resists, it will have a difficult time convincing the international community that it is pursuing nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

Second, Iran should not be allowed to enrich uranium beyond 5 percent. Even though a 20 percent level is not sufficient to produce a nuclear weapon, once such a level is reached, it is difficult to prevent further enrichment in a short time. Hence, prevention is necessary.

Third, Iran would be prohibited from purchasing raw uranium.

Fourth, despite taking steps to restrict enrichment and converting the enriched uranium into fuel rods, Iran would have to transfer the spent fuel to a third country because the production of electricity in a reactor creates a by-product that can be used to make a plutonium bomb.

Fifth, Iran would have to agree to increased supervision by IAEA inspectors, such that they will be allowed entry to all known plants including the new enrichment plant in Qom and the conversion plant in Isfahan. Surprise inspections will not be halted, and Iran will have to ratify the Additional Protocol.

And sixth, Iran will have to sign a commitment to meet these demands. Up until now, Iran has only made verbal voluntary agreements, which are non-binding. It is imperative that they officially commit to adhere to all these restrictions.

To persuade Iran to meet these obligations, the United States needs to set a time frame for solving the nuclear

issue, such as three months. If an agreement were not reached during this period, it would be interpreted as Iran's rejection of compromise and admission of its true intentions to produce nuclear weapons. In such a case, an alternative course would be enacted which would include tougher sanctions on Iran (e.g., halting the purchase of fuel from Iran and the sale of refined fuel to Iran) and halting world banks from providing credit as well as ceasing foreign investments in Iran.

Such sanctions, however, can only be enacted if the EU and G-20 cooperate with the United States. Although it may be very difficult to establish such a coalition, two aspects may prove to be helpful. One is that the United States not only agreed to negotiate with Iran without any preconditions but also recognized Iran's right to produce its own nuclear energy. If Iran refuses to compromise, it would then be clear that the failure of negotiations is not due to lack of good will on the U.S. part, but due to Iran's persistence to reserve tools that would enable it to produce nuclear weapons, something which can lead many countries to align with the United States. Another is the uncovering of the enrichment plant near Qom, which has exposed Iran's true colors and has indirectly increased the likelihood of a coalition being formed, if necessary.

This action plan—based on direct negotiation and willingness to recognize Tehran's right to enrich uranium but requiring tough inspection measures—can be a win-win policy. If Iran agrees to all the terms, then it would be difficult for Iran to acquire the bomb in the foreseeable future. If Tehran rejects this deal, it would be possible to enact sanctions with broad international support.

If Iran responds in a positive way, it will be rewarded. First, the existing sanctions will be lifted. Second, the West will stop taking actions aimed at changing the Iranian regime. And finally, the United States will sustain a continuous dialog with Iran, which will inevitably increase the domestic and international legitimacy of the regime.

**The window of opportunity is larger before a new Iranian anti-aircraft system becomes operational.**

### **Option B: Compromise with Iran**

In another scenario, the United States would still agree to negotiate with Iran without preconditions. It differs, however, from plan A in two ways. First, in this

approach, the nuclear issue is not the most important one. The United States would be interested in discussing it, but will also emphasize other issues including Iranian (passive) assistance in Iraq and in Afghanistan, maintaining stability in the Persian Gulf, and reducing the assistance Iran gives Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. Second, in the nuclear issue, the United States would be willing to compromise on most of the clauses calling on Iran to accept tough technological restrictions and would not require a written Iranian commitment not to attempt to produce nuclear weapons. This action plan can satisfy both parties. Iran would officially be permitted to enrich uranium, sanctions would be removed, Iran's internal and external legitimacy would increase, and above all it would maintain the option to produce nuclear weapons in the future.

From the U.S. view, there are several benefits to this plan. First, this lenient approach on the nuclear issue may lead to Iranian cooperation, or at least non-interference, in Iraq. Since Obama is committed to withdrawing U.S. forces from Iraq, he feels it is important for him to score in this front in the coming two years. Avoiding conflict with Iran suits Obama's approach that believes that conflicts

can be solved by discussion. Agreements with Iran would also promote U.S. ties with China, India, Japan, and Russia. In addition, the president could claim that the immediate threat of Iran producing nuclear weapons is removed. Obviously, the United States would closely follow any developments to avoid surprises in the future.

**Israel cannot  
attack Iran without  
U.S. support.**

What plan has the United States chosen? Is the objective of the negotiation with Iran to force it to agree to effective measures that would prevent it from obtaining nuclear weapons, and if it does not agree, then reach an escalating conflict (plan A)? Or is the objective of the negotiations to reach a compromise at all costs (plan B)? Has the United States already managed to establish sufficient international support to its demands on the nuclear issue to follow plan A? Has the United States already established the second phase, enjoying strong international support to enact sanctions against Iran due to the failure of previous negotiations? Does the United States intend to exploit the revelation of the secret enrichment plant near the city of Qom to toughen positions toward Iran, up to considering a military operation? Has the hope to bring about regime change—a hope recently entertained following the elections in Iran and their controversial results—become a primary goal of the administration in Washington?

It seems that the answers to these questions are not sufficiently clear. Despite the good atmosphere that characterized the talks that began in Geneva on October 1, 2009, it is premature to reach conclusions. True, Iran showed

surprising flexibility during these talks and especially in regard to the idea of moving some of the enriched uranium to Russia. But based on a long experience with the way that the Iranians conduct negotiation, the United States can expect to face a very different approach when the issue is brought to a state where official, practical, and concrete commitments are required. Israel will be among the countries that will closely watch the developments in the future talks. Israel views any option which would not prevent Iran from advancing toward weapons as a cause that might force it to take matters into its hands by employing other measures.

### **Israel's Military Option**

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If Iran acquires nuclear weapons, Israel faces five risks. First, a direct and existential threat will be created, as a regime that questions the existence of Israel will have acquired nuclear weapons. Second, an Iranian nuclear umbrella will be established in the Middle East. Under such circumstances, any conflict in the Middle East, whether Israel is involved or not, will be affected by Iran's "nuclear signals." For instance, if there is another military confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah and Iran elevates the readiness of the nuclear division, while declaring that far-reaching Iranian retaliation should not be excluded, Israel might be deterred and stop the military operation in Lebanon. Third, an arms race in the Middle East will erupt as other countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey will not be able to avoid the need to obtain nuclear weapons. Consequently, the nonproliferation regime will collapse. Fourth, internal stability would erode in Arab countries where Shi'ites are struggling for their political status. The largest danger is in Saudi Arabia, where the Shi'ite minority (20 percent), living in an area replete with oil, could demand its relative share of national wealth or perhaps even more, such as autonomy. Fifth, a nuclear Iran would serve Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's legacy and be seen as a victory for Islam, which could potentially motivate other Muslim states or Muslim communities in non-Muslim states to increase demands.

With these risks in mind, Israel has made it clear that a military attack is an option. The risks, however, are immense. First, an attack could fail tactically, which would seriously harm Israel's deterrent and provide Iran with a good excuse to attack Israel. Second, Iran could fight back conventionally, which is more likely, or even with chemical and biological weapons, which would be more devastating. Third, an attack would mobilize Hezbollah, increasing the chances of a conflict between Israel and Syria. Fourth, Israel will certainly lose its already minor international support. More importantly, Iran will no longer be seen as the bad guy. Fifth, Iran may choose to retaliate using Persian Gulf oil markets. Closing the Strait of Hormuz or attacking the oil fields of the Persian

Gulf states will create a serious worldwide crisis. Sixth, an attack will change the perspective of the Iranian public, which currently does not have very strong negative feelings toward Israel. And seventh, it will increase the anti-Israel sentiment throughout the region. An Israeli attack will involve other countries (Israel might need to use their air space, with or without permission). This indirect and passive assistance to Israel will push Persian Gulf countries to take anti-Israel or anti-U.S. steps. The attack, in fact, could serve as the straw that breaks the camel's back and may even provoke strong reactions from governments throughout the region.

Israel does not have the ability to conduct a prolonged and continuous campaign against Iran for months. It cannot make use of bases or airfields in any other country. In addition, it will not have any partners—the United States will not want to be perceived as supporting an Israeli military action. A military action on the part of Israel, however, will be considered only when the diplomatic process has been exhausted and only when it is clear that the United States is not considering

taking such an action itself. As long as U.S. forces are in Iraq, it will be difficult to carry out an aerial operation against Iran without at least tactical, real-time coordination with the United States

A military attack though is still a possibility. Four elements will determine the effectiveness of an attack. First is the quality of intelligence that Israel would have gathered to determine the accuracy of all

Iranian nuclear sites. Second is penetration of Iranian air space. To hit a target, it has to be reached. The ability to reach a target with precision and critical mass, such as enough air crafts, is dependent on the combination of the ability to fly to the target and to deliver munitions to hit the target with precision. Penetration is dependent primarily on the ratio between the quality of Israeli weapons (planes, bombs, and missiles) and the quality of weapons that the enemy will operate to shoot down Israeli weapons. When the issue is an attack on Iran, it is important to take into account an additional element: the level of ability to fly over other countries, whether secretly or with tacit agreement. The level of tactical surprise will also influence penetration. If the attack is carried out during a diplomatic crisis or increased tensions, effectiveness will be reduced because Iranians would likely raise the alert level of their anti-aircraft array, and at the same time, hasten the scattering and hiding of the targets intended for attack.

Third, is the ability of munitions. Attacking the correct target with precision is not sufficient; causing significant damage to the target is also necessary. Damage depends on the ratio between the efficiency of munitions—in particular the

**It will be easier to deter a hostile but balanced regime than a fanatical regime such as Ahmadinejad's.**

ability to penetrate defenses—and the protective means taken by the defender. And finally, is the connection between physical damage and damage to abilities. Even if Israel succeeded in knowing what to attack, succeeding in attacking and causing significant physical damage does not mean that the required effectiveness has been achieved. Effectiveness is dependent upon the ability of the attacked entity to repair the damage. If, for instance, a key installation is destroyed, but scientific knowledge and human capital have not been harmed, and it is possible to rebuild the installation that was destroyed in a short time, then the effectiveness of the military strike is not high.

Determining the goal, therefore, is absolutely essential for a military attack to be successful. It is clear that causing Iran to surrender or completely destroying all the nuclear facilities are probably unattainable objectives for an Israeli military attack. An attack, however, will certainly disrupt the program and could cause significant delays. The one million dollar question is: how large will these delays be?

There is a competition between Israel and Iran. Over time, Israelis are improving intelligence, the ability to attack, and the preparedness of its forces. The Iranians, for their part, are also investing in a parallel effort concentrating on three fields: hiding and camouflaging nuclear activities, protecting sites (including scattering them), and improving anti-aircraft capabilities. The measure of expected effectiveness is therefore dependent on the difference between improvements in Israeli abilities against Iranian ones. For instance, Iran is trying to equip itself with advanced anti-aircraft systems that it is purchasing from Russia. As soon as these systems are operational, Israel or any other country will encounter greater difficulties than those currently. There is no doubt that the window of opportunity for military action is larger before the new Iranian anti-aircraft system becomes operational.

### **Non-Military Considerations**

In addition to the military and strategic considerations, three other factors must guide Israel. First is the level of U.S. support if Israel attacks. Israel cannot attack Iran without U.S. support. This is true both operationally and strategically. An explicit and strict U.S. veto on an Israeli military attack will take the option off the table. On the other hand, if the United States does not explicitly oppose an Israeli attack, there could be different levels of support. These could range from declared and open support accompanied by a declaration that a country that attacks Israel in response, such as Syria, would be in a state of war with the United States, or to the other extreme, joining widespread, if weak, condemnation of Israel.

Second, is the level of U.S. support if Israel avoids an attack. Avoiding an attack will sooner or later expose Israel to a permanent situation of life under an Iranian

nuclear threat. Israel has the ability to deter Iran, but this ability is limited. If avoiding an attack can bring about a strategic pact with the United States—hopefully in congressional legislation—that defines Iranian aggression toward Israel as equal to aggression against the United States, then Israel will have been compensated for avoiding military attempts to remove the threat. (It is worth emphasizing that an Israeli attack on Iran could create a much higher immediate price for the United States than Israel would pay. In certain circumstances, it would be worth it for the United States to pay Israel not to attack.)

And third is the character of the Iranian regime. Even if there is no revolution in Iran, there is a difference between a situation in which the principal decisionmaker is Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader, or when someone like Ahmadinejad is the determining voice. While the two leaders argue against Israel's existence, the first is more balanced and rational, while the second is motivated by a deep sense of religious mission. Furthermore, Ahmadinejad is prepared to take a higher risk for Iran. It will be easier to deter a hostile but balanced regime than a fanatical regime such as Ahmadinejad's.

### **What Lies Ahead for Iran and Israel**

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An operational nuclear array is dependent on four technological abilities: to enrich uranium (at the desired level), to turn fissile material into a bomb, to launch the bomb via a missile or plane, and to have advanced command and control.

Iran has apparently succeeded in overcoming three of these four technological problems. The only area where it is apparently delaying activities, since 2003, is the nuclear weapons program. Insofar as uranium enrichment is concerned, Iran apparently requires one to two years to accumulate enough enriched nuclear material to be able to create a number of bombs. From the moment Iran decides to renew the weapons program, it will require a short period—up to a year—to complete it. The weapons program can be carried out parallel to the continued accumulation of enriched uranium up to the level of 90 percent. From a technological standpoint, it follows that the window of time available to Israel, on the assumption that Iran continues its nuclear activities without interruption, is not large.

Israel must assume that the United States will give high priority to holding diplomatic negotiations with Iran. Their effectiveness will depend mainly on the price Iran could pay if negotiations fail. The price could be economic sanctions with full international backing, or something more serious such as a U.S. military action. The declared U.S. and international aim is to convince Iran to stop its uranium enrichment activities. It is reasonable to assume that Iran will not agree, and will offer the continuation of uranium enrichment for

“peaceful purposes” (as allowed by the NPT), a commitment not to carry out the weapons stage, and an agreement allowing to international supervision.

This compromise proposal could satisfy both sides: the United States would be able to claim that it prevented Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. Iran, in fact, will benefit in two ways: it will obtain

recognition of its right to enrich uranium, and will also be able, when the time comes, to complete the production of weapons secretly or explicitly and to present this situation as a *fait accompli*. Any U.S.–Iran deal, however, will divest Israel of the ability to attack Iran. An Israeli attack on Iran therefore could be carried out only if U.S.–Iran negotiations fail.

As long as an Israeli military operation is a relevant possibility, Israel will devote great attention to timing. Timing will be dependent on three parameters. First is the strategic optimum that is influenced by many issues, from whether diplomatic negotiations are being held between the United States and Iran, to the situation in Iraq, the relations between Iran and the countries surrounding it, and the world oil market. Second is the technological optimum—in other words, carrying out an operation before Iran reaches full technological ability. And third is the operative optimum as it is analyzed in this paper, namely the improvement of the Israeli ability to attack versus the improvement of the Iranian capabilities to defend and protect the nuclear sites.

Israel will endorse a successful U.S.–Iran deal if it is an effective deal that can guarantee that Iran will not have a military nuclear capability. Israel can also be satisfied if the negotiation fails and, in a short period of time, the United States manages to build a unified and strong international front that will adopt a policy of tough and effective sanctions—sanctions that will isolate Iran completely. Israel will be very frustrated if a “soft deal” is achieved with Iran—a deal that can satisfy the United States and the rest of the world but will keep Iran at the “threshold state” with a capability to violate the agreement in the future and to build a bomb within a short time. If one of these three scenarios occurs, Israel will probably not attack Iran.

Israel might attack Iran if a fourth scenario occurs: the negotiation with Iran fails but the United States neither succeeds in creating an effective international front against Iran nor considers taking military action. Though time will only tell what lies ahead, it will be in everyone’s interest for these negotiations to work out.

**It will be in everyone’s interest for these negotiations to work out.**

## Notes

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1. See National Intelligence Estimate, *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities* (Washington, D.C.: National Intelligence Council, November 2007), [http://www.dni.gov/press\\_releases/20071203\\_release.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf).
2. See Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "Remarks by the President on a New Beginning," Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt, June 4, 2009, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/).