

Is an Israeli attack inevitable?

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To listen to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and his "best friends" Stephen Harper and John Baird, one would think that the Israeli government has made up its mind about attacking Iran's nuclear facilities, and Canada has made up its mind to support it. After all, if Iran is definitely building a nuclear weapon, and if Iran would use that weapon once it got it, then what is there to talk about? But Israel has not made up its mind about an attack. In fact, there is a rampant debate underway within official circles in Israel about the advisability of an attack, and not everyone there accepts the proposition that Iran poses an existential threat to Israel.

Last month I attended a small, closed-door conference on Iran in Israel, along with many senior Israeli officials and its leading experts on Iran. This was not the recent Herzeliya conference, which has become a forum for Israeli officials to make statements to the world press, but a meeting where people really debated the issue. I also had off-line talks with Israeli officials who are working on Iran.

While my overall sense is that the prospects for an Israeli attack have gone up over the past year, there remains an active debate over the wisdom of this move. The debate in Israel has shifted from discussion over the date when Iran might obtain a nuclear weapon capability to a more specific problem. As expressed by Defence Minister Ehud Barak, the key issue now is when Iran's nuclear program will have moved underground to the point that it is effectively immune from an Israeli attack. At this point, it will not matter so much when Iran achieves a bomb; what will matter is that Israel will not be able to stop it.

This date has been pegged by Barak as some point in the summer or early autumn — which places it conveniently close to the U.S. election, thereby ensuring that the issue will ramp up exactly as the U.S. electorate is most attuned to political matters. Importantly, this idea of "immunity" is not agreed with by the U.S., which seems to believe that Iran's nuclear program will remain vulnerable to various forms of attack, if an attack is required, for some time to come. Though there is gloom on the nuclear front, the conclusion of most Israeli analysts is that the deteriorating political, economic and social situation in Iran means that the regime is weakening. Sanctions are hurting, the Arab world is turning its back on Iran (the loss of Syria, if it happens, will be a significant blow), and the regime is increasingly unpopular at home.

Even so, there is a sense in Israel that these developments will not unfold soon enough to help on the nuclear file. Indeed, these trends may cause the Iranian regime to hang onto the nuclear program even more fiercely as a hedge against growing uncertainty.

Broadly speaking, one can discern three schools in Israel on this issue: attack; don't attack; and what might be called the "considered view" school — which is composed of those who neither oppose nor favour an attack, but view the question on its merits at any given moment. The last school is most important and, while many of its members seem to be moving toward a favourable view of an attack, there is no unanimity.

Those who favour an attack, who are a minority, make the argument that the Iranian regime is weak and a historic opportunity exists to topple it. Thus, this is as much about regime change as it is about ending the nuclear program (the two are increasingly seen as synonymous). The Iranian regime will respond to an attack, but its real capabilities are more limited than popularly imagined and Israel can withstand them. There will be no other countries which will rally to

Iran's side, and its capabilities at asymmetric war, while painful, are not decisive for Israel. Above all, with the Syrian regime tottering, Hezbollah will not commit suicide for Iran. The "don't attack" school, another minority, believes that Israel should not attack Iran for any other reason than retaliation for an Iranian attack against Israel — which they regard as exceptionally unlikely. These people are concerned over the possible U.S. response to a unilateral Israeli attack, and especially the response of the exhausted American people if they believe that Israel has dragged them into yet another war in the region. They are also motivated by a belief that Israel's quarrel with Iran is with the regime and not the people and fear that an attack would cause the Iranian people to develop a long-term anger at Israel.

Underlying this is a belief that Israel can deter a nuclear-capable Iran if necessary. Diplomacy should seek to develop a set of understandings that will allow a standoff to endure until the Iranian regime collapses due to its internal problems. Such a situation will not be comfortable for Israel, but she can live with it. The capacity of a nuclear-capable Iran to make mischief for Israel is declining as Tehran's position weakens generally in the region.

Finally, the "considered" school is the most diverse and influential, and is where the greatest change has happened in the past year. Many members of this school are moving toward the hard-line school's view that Iranian retaliation for an attack, though not pleasant, will be manageable and should not deter Israel from an attack. Again, they increasingly discount the idea of a regional war and do not believe that Hezbollah will automatically do Iran's bidding to the point of destroying itself.

More important for these people than the prospect of Iranian retaliation is the question of how the U.S. might respond to an Israeli attack. There is a fear that, if the American people believe that Israel has dragged them into yet another war — just when they are finally extricating themselves from Iraq and Afghanistan — support for Israel will drop. There is also a fear that an attack against the Obama administration's wishes might lead to long-term "grudges" against Israel in the U.S. military and security establishment.

As one member of this school explained, there is a tendency among many Israeli policy-makers to view U.S. politics as a trinity: the administration; the Congress; and the people. So long as at least two of these three are firmly on Israel's side, she can endure animosity from the other. Thus, if Congress and the people are on Israel's side, the administration's anger can be dealt with. Since Congress is likely to be firmly on Israel's side no matter what she does, the key is thus the American people. And, so the thinking seems to go, the key to them is that the U.S. should not be pulled into a regional war which will require American "boots on the ground." Thus, an aerial war, even an extended one, is probably acceptable to the American people.

Those in the "considered" school are increasingly coming around to the view that this outcome is possible. It is obviously a very high-stakes game and relies to a great extent on one's analysis of likely Iranian and (perhaps more importantly) U.S. response to an Israeli attack. Moreover, some in Israel seem to hope that, if the U.S. becomes convinced that Israel will go ahead, Washington may decide to launch the attack itself to ensure that it is done "properly."

In this chain of logic, making Washington think that an Israeli attack is imminent may be as important as the reality of it.

Interestingly, no one I spoke to in the "considered" school had much to say about the economic implications of an Israeli attack on Iran. A significant rise in the world oil price, which would almost surely result from an attack, would have serious consequences for a weakened U.S. and global economy. Even if the U.S. did not become involved in a ground war due to an Israeli attack, the American people would not welcome this outcome either and may blame Israel for it.

Equally, while members of this school could explain why Israel might not bear too heavy a physical retaliation for an attack, they could not explain why Iran would not attack U.S. and Western interests in Afghanistan and elsewhere in response to an Israeli attack, thereby raising the costs to the U.S. and the West in other ways.

The inability of anyone in the “considered” school to explain how Israel would deal with these outcomes, and retain the support of the American people, suggests that these may be the Achilles heels of this school’s thinking. The importance of these issues was highlighted in President Barack Obama’s recent comment that “Any kind of additional military activity inside the Gulf is disruptive and has a big effect on us. It could have a big effect on oil prices, we’ve still got troops in Afghanistan, which borders Iran, and so our preferred solution is diplomatic.”

Some of the Israelis I spoke with indicated that the U.S. election will play an important role. If, by the summer, Netanyahu believes that an attack is necessary, and that Obama is likely to win a second term, he may decide to go before the U.S. election so as to both take advantage of the election campaign as a time when no candidate will criticize Israel, and present a second Obama administration with a *fait accompli*. However, this will happen only if the Israeli government believes there is a good chance the American people will remain onside — and that will require a strong sense that the fallout from an attack will be limited.

Alternatively, if there is a sense that a ground war may result, and that the U.S. will be dragged into it, Israel will likely hold off for fear of losing the long-term support of the American people. As one senior Israeli official told me over dinner in Tel Aviv, “2012 is going to be an interesting year.”

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