

## What Is Worse for Israel, Attacking or Not Attacking Iran's Nuclear Infrastructure?

Written by Massimiliano Fiore

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MASSIMILIANO FIORE, MAY 31 2011

It is possible that at some point in the next 15-18 months Israel's policy-makers and military officials will need to decide whether or not to attack Iran's nuclear infrastructure. That would certainly be one of the most complicated decisions since the establishment of the State of Israel. What political considerations would influence it? And, what short-term strategic developments would be set in motion either by a nuclear-ready Iran or by an Israeli military strike against Iran's nuclear installations?

The preliminary question that must be addressed, however, is whether Israel can adjust to the new reality and live with a nuclear-armed Iran.

In spite of the fact that many policy-makers and military officers in Israel acknowledge that Iran's clerical leaders are not suicidal and do not seek a military confrontation with Israel for fear of nuclear retaliation, they are convinced that under no circumstances should the Islamic Government be permitted to develop nuclear weapons.

And the reason for this is quite simple: no Israeli decision-maker can take the risk of allowing a bitter ideological enemy to get nuclear weapons. No matter how irrational an Iranian attack might look to analysts and experts and no matter how small any chance of attack is, no Israeli political or military leader could accept the responsibility of living under the ultimate threat of a nuclear Armageddon.

Even without the use of nuclear weapons, the strategic context that would unfold would be extremely threatening for Jerusalem. A nuclear-armed Iran would in fact feel almost immune to military threats and emboldened to take more aggressive steps to change the regional balance of power and expand its influence not only in the Persian Gulf, but also in the Fertile Crescent, the Arabian Peninsula and in the Horn of Africa.

This is why Israel will strike. That is what Menachem Begin did in Iraq in 1981, that is what Ehud Olmert did in Syria in 2007 and that is what Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak will do in Iran. They will strike also because they are convinced that sanctions cannot compel Iran to change its nuclear policy and that President Barack Obama would not deploy military force to prevent Iran from becoming nuclear.

But can Israel successfully destroy all Iran's nuclear installations?

Striking at Iran is much more complicated than striking at Iraq or Syria was. Whereas their nuclear installations were concentrated in pockets away from populated areas and their governments lacked the capacity to retaliate, Iran's nuclear facilities are much more dispersed and well-protected (many are built underground) and the Islamic Government has the capability not only to retaliate against Israel, but also to threaten the Dimona Nuclear Reactor. Moreover, the Israeli Air Force would have to fly 1,500-1,700 kilometres over Arab countries to reach Iran, destroy the targets and then fly 1,500-1,700 kilometres back.

However, though the probability of successfully destroying all Iran's nuclear targets is not very high, Israeli policy-makers and military officials would nevertheless still be extremely satisfied with only delaying Iran's nuclear

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programme. But the real question is: would it be worth all the trouble it would inevitably unleash?

Attacking Iran would in fact mean an all-out war. The Islamic Republic's response is likely going to be both harsh and long-term. It would retaliate by firing its ballistic Shahab-3 missiles against Israel's cities, military centres and nuclear installations. Additionally, its proxies (Hezbollah and Hamas) would be instructed to launch suicide and rocket attacks. During the 2006 Lebanon War, Hezbollah fired approximately 4,000 rockets, which had the effect of paralysing the life of the country for over a month and of driving hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens from their homes in the north. Since then, however, Hezbollah has replenished and enhanced its arsenal and it has now got some 40,000 rockets. With no effective missile defence system operational (Iron Dome, Magic Wand and Arrow III are all still being developed), thousands of missiles and rockets would therefore fall on Israel, bringing the country's economy to a virtual halt and causing hundreds if not thousands of dead and wounded. But, unfortunately, there is more.

An Israeli strike on Iran would also sow instability throughout the Middle East. The Islamic Republic could disrupt the oil flow to the West by attacking oil facilities in the Gulf and/or mining the Straits of Hormuz. It could increase subversion inside Afghanistan, with the goal of driving the US to withdraw its troops and preventing the emergence of a strong central Afghan government. It could furthermore strengthen its financial and military support of radical Islamic groups to subvert pro-Western governments in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. It is also very likely that the US would be held responsible for the Israeli strike and therefore be subjected to attacks on its forces stationed in Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iraq, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Worse still, Iran could once again unleash international terrorism against Jewish and American targets not only in the Middle East, but also in Africa, Europe and Latin America.

What is the greater risk for Israel then, a military strike on Iran within the next few months or a nuclear-ready Iran at the end of that period?

While it is certainly true that Jerusalem "does not have the luxury of choosing between a good and a bad alternative", one is left with the impression that containing a nuclear Iran is the lesser of two evils. Yet, while their fears are understandable, it does seem that, given the heavy costs and poor chances for success, containment is still the most sensible policy for Israel.

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