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IRAN IN ISRAEL'S STRATEGIC CALCULUS

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"Will Israel Attack Iran?" was the provocative headline of respected Israeli journalist Ronen Bergman's January story published in *The New York Times Magazine*. Bergman claimed that "yes," Israel would attack Iran in 2012.¹ A few days later, Israeli scholar Barry Rubin published a long article of his own which argued that "no," Israel would not strike Iran.²

So, which is it? Yes or no? The less satisfactory answer, the less media-worthy answer, but perhaps the more accurate and honest answer is that "it depends." And therefore, the better question to ask, it seems to me, is under what set of circumstances is the current Israeli leadership more or less likely to feel it must take independent military action?

Before I address that question, however, I would like to briefly explain the three assumptions that underlie my interpretation of this issue. First, I believe Iran's ultimate goal is a nuclear weapons capability. Second, I believe Israel's security cabinet has not yet made any decision about a military strike on Iran but that the current government views a nuclear-armed Iran as an unacceptable outcome.

And, third, I am working on the assumption that the White House's actual policy matches its statements. For example, in late February, White House spokesman Jay Carney said, "Israel and the U.S. share the same objective, which is to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon."³ In other words, I am assuming that if there is any difference between the US and Israel on this issue it is a difference of means rather than ends. The question of the means, of how best to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, is no minor issue, however, and it has been intensely scrutinized in the American media since Bergman's article.

The diversity of opinion and the public debate on this issue has been no less robust in Israel.⁴ Meir Dagan, the former chief of the Mossad, has been a repeated and outspoken critic of an Israeli military strike.⁵ Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon, as well as a respected scholar of Iran, Professor David Menashri, have publicly argued that Iran is an international challenge that requires a global solution, and should not be left to Israel alone.⁶ Israelis on Facebook also started a well-publicized grassroots campaign to reach out to the Iranian people in joint resistance to the prospect of a war between the two states.⁷ Yet, despite such a plurality of voices among security elites as well as in Israel's dynamic civil society, at the end of the day Defense Minister Ehud Barak and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu are likely to be the two Israeli officials driving the decision-making process on the Iran issue.

¹ Ronen Bergman, "Will Israel Attack Iran?", *The New York Times Magazine*, 25 January 2012.

² Barry Rubin, "Israel Isn't Going to Attack Iran and Neither Will the United States," *PJ Media.com*, 26 January 2012.

³ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Daily Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 21 February 2012.

⁴ See: Dalia Dassa Kaye, Alireza Nader, Parisa Roshan, "Israel and Iran: A Dangerous Rivalry," RAND National Defense Research Institute, 2011, pp. 19-47.

⁵ See: Shlomo Brom, Shai Feldman, Shimon Stein, "The Public Discussion of Israel's Strategy regarding a Nuclear Iran," INSS Insight No. 310, January 31, 2012.

⁶ Danny Ayalon, *Israel Hayom* (Hebrew), 15 March 2012; and, David Menashri, *CNN.com*, 16 February 2012.

⁷ See: Dimi Reider, "Israeli-Iranian Solidarity Exchange Sweeps Facebook," +972, 18 March 2012, accessed at: <http://972mag.com/israeli-iranian-solidarity-exchange-sweeps-facebook/38565/>

IMPLICATIONS OF THE 2007 NIE

In 2007, the US published a controversial National Intelligence Estimate that stated: “We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003 [following the US invasion of Iraq] Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program...”⁸ The lesson embedded in the key judgments of the 2007 NIE is the idea that Iran halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003, following the swift removal of Saddam in Iraq, because it believed the US was preparing for Iran next and the Islamic Republic's leadership did not want its nuclear program to be Washington's *casus belli* for war. And while past behavior is often a poor predictor of future action, Teheran does have a record of choosing to compromise on core principles when it believes the regime's survival is facing an *imminent* and *credible* threat.⁹ The message embedded in the 2007 US National Intelligence Estimate is at the heart of the current Israeli administration's perception of the Iranian nuclear challenge.

If there is a difference in perception between Israeli and US officials regarding pressure, it is on the question of applying pressure in parallel rather than in sequence. Israelis officials appear to believe that pressure applied from three directions—financial sanctions, subversion, and a credible threat of military action¹⁰—should be applied *simultaneously* rather than in a staggered sequence.

It is unfortunate, even tragic, that applying credible, multi-dimensional pressure is necessary to create the diplomatic space for serious negotiations with Iran. Framing the debate on this issue as a choice between either war or diplomacy (or coercion versus engagement) is wrong. Tragically, in order for diplomacy to succeed there must be credible pressure to provide Iran with the necessary incentive to engage in serious negotiations rather than in endless "talks" or "dialogue."

Iran's recent threats to close the Strait of Hormuz came in response to the announcements of the most recent US (financial) and European (oil embargo) sanctions, and are a powerful indication that Iran's leaders are not indifferent to coordinated multi-dimensional Western pressure.¹¹ Moreover, Iran's threatening response came before sanctions were even implemented. Ostensibly, Iran was reacting to pressure that is still three months away; the latest sanctions are not scheduled to come into full force until the end of June or early July. Therefore, the P5+1 (the five members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany) meetings scheduled for mid-April provide a unique window of opportunity, before crippling financial and oil sanctions are fully implemented, for the West to vigorously explore whether an interim compromise with Iran is possible.¹²

WHAT A COMPROMISE WOULD LOOK LIKE

Ephraim Asculai of Israel's Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) recently outlined a step-by-step preliminary plan that is very similar to the Russian proposal from July 2011.¹³ A confidence-building first step would be for Iran to suspend all enrichment activity at its underground facility at Fordow. Second, in exchange for the US lifting its banking sanctions, Iran would suspend enriching its uranium stockpiles from 3.5 to 20 percent, and transfer all of its 20 percent low enriched uranium into international custody. In exchange, the international community would guarantee Iran the fuel needed to operate its Tehran research reactor (TRR). Further, Iran would be expected to immediately agree to the IAEA's Additional Protocol which would allow inspectors greater freedom and access to conduct inspections of Iran's nuclear facilities. With a firm commitment, these steps could all be implemented relatively quickly, and might create enough confidence to arrive at a more serious and enduring compromise.¹⁴ Israel's official policy is opposed to any uranium enrichment on Iranian soil, but in late 2009, when it appeared there was an interim confidence-building agreement with Iran based on P5+1 meetings at Vienna and Geneva, Prime Minister Netanyahu indicated Israel could abide by an interim compromise that would allow for certain levels of internationally monitored enrichment on Iranian soil, suggesting another similar compromise would not be a political non-starter for Israel. I remain deeply skeptical that Iran is likely to approach the forthcoming April P5+1 meetings ready to negotiate along the lines Asculai has outlined; yet it is the West's obligation to make every effort to test whether or not Iran is willing to take concrete and immediate steps toward a compromise prior to the implementation of sanctions at the end of June.

In the past, Iran has used the words “talks” and “dialogue” while the West refers to “negotiations” in reference to P5+1 meetings. The difference is not insignificant. If Iran is ready to negotiate seriously then it should not insist on preconditions, ask for months before implementing parts of an agreement, change meeting venues, insist on ambiguous wording, or be

⁸ U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “NIE: Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities,” 2007, accessed at: http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf

⁹ For a more comprehensive presentation of this argument, see: Brandon Friedman, “Principles and Practice of Iran's Post Revolutionary Foreign Policy,” Working Paper #6, The Yale Initiative for the Interdisciplinary Study of Antisemitism, 2010.

¹⁰ This strategy was outlined one year ago in: Eric S. Edelman, Andrew F. Krepinevich, and Evan Braden Montgomery, “The Dangers of a Nuclear Iran: The Limits of Containment,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2011.

¹¹ Dennis Ross, “Iran is Ready to Talk,” *The New York Times*, 14 February 2012.

¹² Dennis Ross and David Makovsky, “The U.S. Can Meet Israel halfway on Iran,” *The Washington Post*, 31 March 2012.

¹³ “ISIS Analysis of Russian Proposal: Ask Iran to Come Clean on Nuclear Weaponization Before Removing Sanctions,” Institute for Science and International Security, ISIS Report, 4 August 2011.

¹⁴ Ephraim Asculai, “Can an Interim Agreement with Iran be Reached by July?,” INSS Insight No. 312, 1 February 2012.

allowed to postpone final agreements until more senior officials have approved them.¹⁵ Iran should be ready to immediately implement time-sensitive commitments for there to be any chance of a successful compromise. But this raises the question of whether the Islamic Republic of Iran really is ready to compromise with the West on this issue.

In his annual NoRuz (the Iranian New Year) address, one year ago, Iran's supreme leader (*rahbar*) 'Ali Khamene'i cited Muammar Gaddafi as an example of what happens when a leader makes a nuclear compromise with the West. Yet US President Obama made several serious and public gestures of reconciliation toward Iran during the spring of 2009, and these overtures were rejected by Khamene'i's regime. Iran's leadership might have believed its increasing regional influence and the US weakness in Iraq and Afghanistan in early 2009 allowed Iran the luxury of ignoring the new US president's overtures. If this was indeed Iran's perception, then it may recognize the context in the spring of 2012 is very different. In the wake of the Arab uprisings last year, Iran's primary allies in the region—Syria, Hizballah, and Hamas—are weaker and more isolated than they were in 2009. Therefore, Iran's response to this new context could cut either way. Khamene'i may elect to stay the course and continue Iran's dangerous game of nuclear chicken with the West, believing a nuclear weapons capability is the only way he can guarantee the regime's survival. On the other hand, it is possible that its current geopolitical isolation and the threat of new and unprecedented sanctions will provide Iran with enough incentive to approach the upcoming P5+1 meeting with a less defiant and more flexible posture than in the past.

Time is a critically important element in this issue. Iran's centrifuges continue to spin and it has recently introduced a small number of advanced new centrifuges at its underground facility at Fordow, near Qom. As this new technology comes online in greater numbers, Iran's ability to produce highly enriched uranium will increase. Israel's defense minister, Ehud Barak, has alluded to a "zone of immunity," suggesting a red line with respect to this kind of activity at Fordow. If Iran significantly expands its advanced enrichment capacity at Fordow, or transfers large amounts of its 20 percent enriched uranium stockpiles from Natanz to Fordow for enrichment to 90 percent weapons-grade uranium, Israeli officials may feel compelled to reassess Israel's commitment to the joint Western strategy of pressure and negotiations.

Marvin Weinbaum, a former U.S. Department of State intelligence analyst, has argued that a preemptive Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear facilities would not threaten the Iranian regime's survival and would bring the Islamic Republic's isolated leadership a political windfall, if it did not respond with direct military attacks of its own.¹⁶ The corollary of this argument, if one takes into account Ehud Barak's zone of immunity, would be that Iranian leaders might then consider provoking an Israeli attack prior to the US presidential elections in November, gambling the regime in Iran could survive a limited Israeli strike, and then attempt to use Israeli pre-emption to reverse its diplomatic isolation and drive a wedge between Israel and the West while it reconstituted its nuclear program. While this scenario is unlikely, ultimately Israeli leaders may calculate that eliminating the strategic threat of a nuclear-armed Iran—even if only temporarily—outweighs the risk of any political gains that may or may not accrue to the Islamic Republic of Iran following an Israeli attack.¹⁷

On the other hand, if Israel elects to adhere to the jointly coordinated Western strategy of strictly applied multidimensional pressure through the November 2012 US elections, in spite of any incremental Iranian nuclear developments, then the onus to make good on the strong statements he made during his March 4th speech at AIPAC would fall on a second-term President Obama in the event of his re-election and if there were no change in Iran's nuclear posture following six months of new sanctions come year's end 2012.¹⁸ While some American journalists have made much of Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's Holocaust rhetoric, he is also well known for placing great emphasis on the robust US-Israeli strategic alliance. Preserving the integrity of this critical relationship, without sacrificing Israel's independence of action, may be an equally important element in the Israeli strategic calculus during the next seven to twelve months.

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¹⁵ Asculai, "Can an Interim Agreement with Iran be Reached by July?"

¹⁶ Marvin G. Weinbaum, "Israel's Gift to Iran," *The National Interest*, 19 March 2012; or, Colin H. Kahl, *Washington Post*, 2 March 2012.

¹⁷ Yoaz Hendel, "Iran's Nukes and Israel's Dilemma," *The Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2012, pp. 31-38; also, see: Ron Tira, "Can Iran Be Deterred?," Policy Review No. 169, Hoover Institution, 1 October 2011.

¹⁸ For the full text of President Obama's 4 March 2012 speech at AIPAC, see: <http://www.ibtimes.com/articles/308708/20120304/full-text-obama-aipac-2012-speech-here.htm>