

Israel Is Wide Awake as Decision Time Approaches on Nuclear Iran

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Far from sleepwalking into war with Iran, Israelis have their eyes wide open on the nuclear threat and expect others to do the same.

While David Miliband and Nader Mousavizadeh warn that "war talk" regarding Iran's nuclear programme may become a "self-fulfilling prophecy" (see "The Risks of Sleepwalking into a War with Iran," December 2), Israel has been publicly debating the wisdom of a military strike on Iran's programme. But it is not "sleepwalking" into a war.

Israel perceives a nuclear Iran as a potentially existential threat. The possible combination of extreme Islamism, a messianic leadership calling to "wipe Israel off the map" and nuclear weapons is deeply sobering. Given Israel's collective memory of the Holocaust and its hostile surroundings, Israelis take this threat especially seriously.

When Israel defines a nuclear Iran as "unacceptable," it means it. But it suspects that for the rest of the world, "unacceptable" really means "undesirable." Mr. Miliband and Mr. Mousavizadeh admit that the price of a nuclear-armed Iran would be "unacceptably high" but fail to say what should be done if non-military pressures fail.

The Israeli discourse is not mere sabre-rattling. It is a real debate driven by the feeling that Iran's nuclear project is advancing, international resolve is insufficient and regime change does not look imminent. Ehud Barak, Israel's defence minister, recently implied that the critical decision point, between "bomb" and "bombing" before it is too late, would be reached in under a year.

Either choice comes with a heavy price. Even assuming Iran can be deterred from using a nuclear bomb, a nuclear Iran will dramatically upset the strategic balance in a region undergoing revolutionary transition. Having defeated international pressure and acquired a nuclear umbrella, Iran will be emboldened as a radical regional pole.

A nuclear Iran will overshadow the calculations of regional actors, trigger a regional nuclear arms race, destroy the non-proliferation treaty and increase the danger of miscalculation towards a nuclear crisis. Iran will escalate its

destabilising power projection, threatening Israel and moderate Arab regimes, undermining any peace process, manipulating energy markets and posing as guardian of certain Muslim communities even beyond the Middle East. Over time, one cannot rule out proliferation to non-state actors. Containment and deterrence will do little to offset these severe consequences.

A military strike, on the other hand, could entail serious unintended consequences. Iran will respond violently, both directly and through proxies such as Hizbollah, which has more than 40,000 rockets aimed at Israel. The conflict could escalate into a regional war. Iran may act aggressively in the straits of Hormuz, leading to a spike in oil prices, although disrupting oil exports would be self-defeating.

Moreover, to make a military strike worth the cost, Iran must be prevented from rebuilding its programme, requiring international resolve in the face of a wounded and defiant Iran -- a real challenge.

The right choice is not self-evident. But whatever the correct judgment, there is no evidence to substantiate the assertion by Mr. Miliband and Mr. Mousavizadeh that discussing the military option "weakens our hand." Indeed, the only time Iran froze its weaponisation programme was when the US invaded Iraq and Iran believed it was next. A credible military option therefore, far from weakening sanctions and diplomacy, is essential to their success.

I do not advocate war here. I know first-hand its terrible price. The Israeli public debate reflects the fact that Israelis do not want war. Rather, they feel that while the problem is not exclusively theirs, a failure of international pressure will leave them alone with that decision. Far from sleepwalking, Israelis have their eyes wide open and expect others to do the same.

Michael Herzog, a retired brigadier general in the Israel Defense Forces, is The Washington Institute's Milton Fine international fellow, based in Israel. ❖

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