

Iran's Nuclear Program: Deciphering Israel's Signals

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Brief Analysis

Israel's options vis-a-vis Iran's nuclear ambitions are frequently discussed by experts and analysts abroad. A vast body of literature already has been produced by U.S. scholars debating whether Israel should, could, or finally would choose to mount a preemptive strike against Iran's key nuclear installations in an effort to disrupt the Islamic Republic's pursuit of atomic weapons. However, in Israel itself there is surprisingly little public discussion of this issue.

Little Public Debate

The Israeli political leadership -- in government as well as in the opposition -- refrains from addressing this very complex dilemma except by making brief vague statements. The military and intelligence communities are under strict instructions to avoid making remarks except to affirm that Israel is preparing itself for "any eventuality." They also refuse to take part in off-the-record briefings related to Israel's possible response to the challenge. The Israeli media has not generated a public debate on the pros and cons of military action -- partly in view of censorship restrictions. Even members of local think tanks and academic circles prove reluctant to venture into this domain.

Therefore, the nature of the quiet deliberations within Israel's top echelons -- and the different positions expressed by the participants in these sessions -- remains largely unreported and so far removed from public scrutiny. There is no doubt, of course, that an intense discussion of the Iranian threat is taking place and that Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak are updated constantly concerning various military options as well as strategies relying on deterrence and upgrading of the country's antiballistic defenses.

Assessing Israel's Stance

Israel has no great appetite for taking on Iran on its own, recognizing the difficulties involved in an attack as well as the potential that Iran could retaliate either with its Shehab-3 missiles, already operational, by embarking upon a large-scale terrorism campaign, or by having Hizballah ignite a conflict on the Lebanese front. Many view the military option as the "worst possible course" other than tolerating an Iran equipped with nuclear warheads. The Israeli leadership would, therefore, prefer action by the United States to stop Iran from acquiring a bomb either through diplomatic dialogue, effective sanctions, or -- if it came to it -- military strikes. Needless to say, a U.S. attack

is bound to be much wider in scope and more devastating than any blow delivered by the Israel Defense Forces.

At the same time, many in Israel feel strongly that the country does possess the military capability to launch a successful strike against a limited number of Iranian nuclear installations to delay the pace of Iran's nuclear program by at least a couple of years. At least some in Israel believe that Iranian reprisals would be more restrained than public warnings from Tehran might indicate, and that Hizballah may attempt to employ its long-range Iranian missiles in a manner that would not necessarily lead to full-scale war. The argument would be that although the organization's long-range missiles are effectively under the control of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Qods Force, Hizballah's leader Hassan Nasrallah would hesitate to provoke the Israelis into undertaking an all-out counteroffensive. Some Israelis argue that Iran would not necessarily retaliate against the United States and its Arab allies in the Gulf or Iraq for fear of compelling President Obama to strike back.

The Israelis are well aware that they would not be able to completely eliminate Iran's nuclear capabilities or deny the Islamic Republic the possibility of doubling its efforts in the future. But Israel feels it could gain time for additional efforts by the United States and others to persuade the Iranians to give up their nuclear ambitions. Israelis remember that their 1981 attack on the Iraqi reactor only led Saddam Hussein to speed up his plans to achieve nuclear capability. They are not yet sure that Syrian leader Bashar al-Asad has given up his own nuclear ambitions following the air attack on al-Kibar in September 2007. Still, from an Israeli point of view, delaying the threat by a few years is a worthy goal.

Assessing Iranian missile power, Israelis tend to believe that as time passes Iran's ability to launch more missiles simultaneously will grow considerably. In the near term, they feel Iranian retaliation would essentially entail a repeat of the first Gulf war experience in 1991, when Israel had to absorb forty Iraqi Scuds -- mainly directed against Tel Aviv and Haifa -- with minimal casualties. The Iranian air force simply does not have the ability to reach Israel, and a naval attack of any sort is a remote possibility.

The majority view at this point is that Hamas may violate the present de facto truce along the Gaza Strip with a few rocket salvos in solidarity with Iran -- perhaps in an attempt to hit the outskirts of Tel Aviv -- but that the group seeks to avoid a repetition of Operation Cast Lead, even if it were promised that Israel would also be engaged on the Lebanese front and exchanging blows with Iran itself. Hamas is quite eager not to appear as an Iranian proxy, and its leader, Khaled Mashal, has already quietly warned his Iranian sponsors that any nuclear attack against Israel is bound to hit many Palestinians.

The current assessment in Israel is that although the Iranian regime long ago decided to get "within reach" of a bomb and is doing its utmost to move toward this objective, no decision has yet been made to go for a "breakout." The reason is that Iran would not risk the consequences of a breakout for a bomb or two but rather would only contemplate such a dramatic step when it had enough low-enriched uranium for a modest "arsenal" of about a half dozen bombs. In effect, Israel shares the assumption that very limited time still remains, though without much hope, for attempts to persuade Iran to halt its pursuit of atomic weapons.

Yet, for Israel, not only the purely nuclear clock is ticking. Aside from watching the speed with which the Iranians assemble a "mini arsenal," Israeli strategic planners have their eyes on another ticking clock: that marking the pace of Iranian efforts to improve defenses for their most sensitive targets, whether by burying them underground or by trying to make them otherwise immune to attack by air forces or by Israel's missile force. Israel's decision on whether to go it alone will depend greatly on its estimation of the likelihood that a strike would succeed. Thus, a concern may be Iran's successful protection of its installations, which could force Israel to make an early decision.

Israelis are concerned that a nuclear Iran will trigger an arms race among neighboring Arab states. They suspect Saudi Arabia may already have tacit understandings with Pakistan regarding some form of nuclear assistance, and

the Israeli intelligence agencies are closely watching moves by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and others to develop nuclear programs for so-called peaceful purposes. The Arab media is rich with calls to have a "Sunni Arab bomb" to counter Iran's quest for hegemony with a "Persian Shiite bomb."

One scenario advanced by Israelis assumes that the Iranian leadership may resolve to "hang in" for a considerable period just below the weaponization red line, while upgrading and broadening its technical capabilities and enjoying the political clout associated with being an "almost" nuclear power. One good reason for the Iranians to "hang in" would be to wait for the development of future generations of long-range missiles. This scenario would translate into an extended period of regional tension and uncertainty.

No Expectation of Deal

As Israelis monitor the ups and certainly the downs of the current negotiations of the so-called P-5 + 1 with Iran, they will not rush their decisions. Those Israelis charged with following Iran are convinced that, at present, a deal could prove elusive. This means the time for Israel to determine its course may come by around mid-2010.

Ehud Yaari is a Washington Institute Lafer international fellow and Middle East correspondent for Israel's Channel Two. ❖

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