

Bombing Iran or Living with Iran's Bomb?

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In-Depth Reports

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On September 21, 2008, Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Isaac Ben-Israel, Kassem Jaafar, and Anthony Cordesman addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. General Ben-Israel is a member of the Knesset representing the Kadima Party. Mr. Jaafar is a Britain-based analyst and advisor on strategic and diplomatic affairs for the Policy Exchange of London and the Transatlantic Institute in Brussels, and has also served as a diplomatic advisor to the government of Qatar. Mr. Cordesman is the Arleigh A. Burke chair in strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and a national security analyst for ABC News.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Isaac Ben-Israel

The international community needs to decide whether prevention or deterrence is the correct strategy for dealing with Iran. Although prevention may fail, it is the better option.

There are many reasons to be concerned about a nuclear Iran, apart from the regime's frequent anti-American and anti-Israeli statements. Iranian nuclear capability would mean the end of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and would quickly spark a Middle Eastern nuclear arms race. In fact, Arab countries feel less threatened by Israel's nuclear capability than they would by an Iranian nuclear capability: Iran is a Shiite, non-Arab state, and when its leaders talk about "exporting the revolution," its Sunni Arab neighbors regard such statements as serious threats. A nuclear Iran would also have terrible consequences on the terrorism front, because transnational terrorist organizations would be able to acquire fissile material for use the world over.

Israeli military planners have assessed that Israel would survive a nuclear war with Iran, but that Iran would be returned to the Stone Age in such a war. Yet Israel cannot conclude from such assessments that Iran would hesitate to attack: We have few insights into Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's decision making, particularly regarding regional and international security assessments, so his actions remain unpredictable. Moreover, Iran prefers using proxies rather than direct engagement to achieve its foreign policy goals, so how would Israel retaliate for nuclear attacks that are sponsored, but not carried out, by Iran?

For these reasons, it is clear that Israel -- and, indeed, the international community -- cannot allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. Some observers argue that Iran will never agree to halt its nuclear program, and that the military option is therefore the only option. Yet, although the use of force could destroy the program temporarily, it could not stop Iran's nuclear activities forever. That makes diplomacy an even more important option, particularly in light of Iran's announcement that it would retaliate against Israel and the global oil market if it were attacked.

The urgent question is how much time is left for diplomacy to work. Estimates regarding Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons range from two to five years; the regime still must overcome a few technological obstacles before its program is complete. This interim should be sufficient to mobilize the international community to put pressure on Iran. And such directed pressure would necessarily include a special role for Russia, which has so far focused its

diplomatic efforts on playing the United States against Iran.

Kassem Jaafar

This crisis is a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situation. Because of that, the international community remains mired in uncertainty on whether it can allow a nuclear Iran among its ranks. To clear away such uncertainty, we need to examine Iran's purpose in having a nuclear program, remembering that its efforts on that front are part of a general, ongoing military build-up.

Iran claims that it is pursuing a civilian nuclear program. Moving from civilian to military technology is relatively easy, so the application of this knowledge to military purposes is inevitable. Iran's actual purpose is to become a superpower. The regime believes that it has the right to play a role in the Arab-Israeli conflict. It also believes that it has a duty to undo the wrongs committed by the majority of Muslims (that is, Sunnis) in deciding not to follow the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law Ali (who is revered by Shiites). And from a more realpolitik perspective, nuclear weapons would give Iran control over the region's economy.

Regarding the regime's general military build-up, Iran has been developing missiles capable of reaching Europe, as well as chemical and biological weaponry. There are no reliable figures available on these and other military expenditures, making it difficult to estimate the exact size of the country's military programs. Clearly, though, it has been a strong supporter of terrorism.

These trends are worrisome, not just to Israel, but also to Arabs -- particularly in the Persian Gulf states. If Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons, dramatic proliferation would follow. When Arab governments are threatened, they seek protection rather than take direct action. Thus, although they may quietly ask for help, they will not publicly provide tactical assistance to the United States in confronting Iran. There are indications that the Saudis have been discreetly trying to influence Russia to do more on Iran. For instance, following a series of unannounced visits to Moscow by Prince Bandar bin Sultan, Russia offered to supply Iran with nuclear fuel so that it would forgo its uranium enrichment program; Tehran rejected the offer.

These and other factors sustain the climate of uncertainty on how to deal with Iran. Should the main strategy be diplomacy or military action? If the latter, should the goal be limited to destroying all nuclear facilities, or should it include regime change? And how should Iran's proxies be handled? On the diplomatic front, there are several specific measures that could help the situation. For example, the United States would have a much better chance of enlisting Russia's help if it abandoned its missile defense shield in Eastern Europe. And if countries such as Israel and India became NPT signatories, they would remove an excuse for Iran to opt out of the treaty. In any case, if Iran becomes a nuclear power, the resulting war will not be a mere Cold War. The time for the international community to be certain and resolute on Iran is coming soon.

Anthony Cordesman

The most significant problem in determining how to handle Iran is lack of knowledge. We know that Tehran has developed several new types of uranium-enriching centrifuges in recent months, and that its desire for a nuclear program goes back to the 1970s. Yet we have no firm knowledge of how many facilities the regime has, or how the centrifuges have been distributed among them. The known nuclear sites are spread out, and the only good intelligence on them is classified. Even intelligence experts may not be able to determine when the point of no return has been reached regarding the extent of Iran's nuclear program.

This lack of knowledge creates several tactical problems in military scenarios against Iran, complicating decisions about where to strike, how to strike, and whether the action taken is sufficient. A premature attack based on insufficient information would be as dangerous as waiting too long to attack; for example, it could spark increased activity at other, unknown nuclear plants or provoke a biological or chemical counterattack.

International decision makers must also keep in mind that a U.S. strike would be significantly different from an Israeli strike. Israel favors hard and fast attacks because its military is not capable of sustained operations. The United States, however, favors longer, more thorough operations; the initial phase alone would likely last three to seven days. In other words, we need to determine whether the best method of eliminating Iran's nuclear program is with a scalpel or a chainsaw.

The most important question before the international community now is not whether Iran will acquire a nuclear weapon, but what the consequences will be when it does. Thus far, Tehran's reaction to perceived threats against its nuclear program, such as the destruction of the Syrian reactor, has been to better secure its facilities. The situation has been further complicated by Arab unwillingness to publicly join the United States in its efforts, and by the fact that Iranian public sentiment is most likely incapable of toppling the regime. Whatever course of action is taken, the results of that decision will play out for decades. ❖

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