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# Middle East Brief

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## What to Do about Nuclearizing Iran? The Israeli Debate

Prof. Shai Feldman, Brig. Gen. (ret.) Shlomo Brom, and  
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The closing months of 2011 have seen a sharpening of the debate in Israel about the implications of Iran's nuclear efforts, as well as about the relative efficacy of different means for preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, communications intensified between the Netanyahu government and the Obama administration regarding the same issue; a war of words had developed between the U.S. and Iran regarding the latter's possibly blocking the Straits of Hormuz in retaliation for the efforts to prevent it from "going nuclear"; and the U.S. and its key European allies escalated their non-military efforts to dissuade Iran from continuing its nuclear project by applying even more biting economic sanctions, including the targeting of Iran's central bank.

In parallel, other developments seem to have slowed Iran's efforts to develop deliverable nuclear weapons. Explosions on November 12, 2011, at an Iranian ballistic missile testing site, which took the lives of senior Iranian military officers, were followed by another mysterious explosion in Isfahan, where Iran's uranium conversion plant is located, on November 28; and on January 10, 2012, an Iranian nuclear scientist who had reportedly headed a division at the uranium enrichment plant in Natanz met a violent death. An earlier cyber attack on Iran's centrifuges at Natanz was said to have caused at least a year's delay in Iran's nuclear program.

Nonetheless, skepticism as to whether this array of measures will be sufficient to stop Iran's perceived march toward nuclear weapons increasingly fuels

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speculation that Israel will strike Iran's nuclear installations militarily. Given Iran's geostrategic position, there is much at stake in its possible acquisition of nuclear weapons, just as there is in a military strike to prevent it from obtaining such weapons. Yet the public discussion of these issues to date seems unstructured, often bordering on mere polemics. Much of it is misplaced, focusing on operational issues that are impossible to determine without access to classified data, while avoiding an examination of premises that are often adopted as self-evident. This Brief will attempt to clarify the Israeli debate about Iran's possible acquisition of nuclear weapons, and about a possible attempt to prevent Iran from obtaining such weapons by striking its nuclear facilities militarily. It will identify the main questions addressed and provide some sense of the contending arguments regarding the key issues associated with Iran's nuclear challenge—without seeking to adjudicate the debate.

## Is a Nuclear Iran an Existential Threat?

The most basic issue being debated in Israel is whether or not Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons would constitute an existential threat. This debate is conducted in an imprecise manner, because participants in the debate seldom if ever take care to define what they mean by the term "existential threat." One possible definition is technical, implying the ability to destroy a small vulnerable state like Israel with only a few nuclear weapons, just as the Soviets' arsenal of over 25,000 nuclear weapons at the height of the Cold War could have destroyed the United States many times over.

Yet Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, seems to imply much more than a technical definition when he compares the repercussions of Iran's acquiring nuclear weapons to the consequences of Nazi Germany having possessed such weapons in the late 1930s. In drawing a straight line from the Holocaust to Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons, Netanyahu leaves unambiguous whether or not he would view this development as an "existential threat."<sup>1</sup> An only slightly less ominous assessment was offered by Israel's then Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh, who predicted that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons would breed extreme anxiety among Israelis, propelling their mass emigration from the Jewish state.<sup>2</sup> Sneh's view, then, was that Iranian nuclear weapons would result in the demographic destruction of Israel even without their actually being used.

By contrast, when asked whether he viewed Iranian nuclear weapons as threatening Israel's survival, Defense Minister Ehud Barak opined on more than one occasion that Israel is a strong regional power and that it has a response to every contingency. In fact, on one occasion Barak went so far as to say that for Israel, not having defined borders with the Palestinians was more dangerous than the threat posed by Iran.<sup>3</sup> In the same spirit, when asked whether the situation was analogous to Nazi Germany's obtaining nuclear weapons, Minister of Intelligence Dan Meridor said that he did not feel comfortable with the comparison. Indeed, Israelis who don't accept the "existential threat" argument at times seem almost offended by the comparison to the 1930s. They point out that not only did Jews then lack a state to defend them, but the state they now have is regarded by its neighbors as enjoying a nuclear monopoly in the Middle East. For this and other reasons, some Israelis—notably the current Head of the Mossad, Tamir Pardo, as well as its former Head, Efraim Halevi—believe that while Iran poses a significant threat to Israel's security, it does not constitute an "existential threat."<sup>4</sup>

## Could a Nuclear Iran Be Deterred?

Occasional references to Israel's own nuclear deterrent as an important component of the country's standing as a strong regional power which has a response to every contingency point to the connection between the Israeli debate over the "existential" impact of Iran's possible acquisition of nuclear weapons and the differing judgments in Israel regarding the likelihood that a nuclear Iran could be deterred. Given that the efficacy of deterrence depends on leaders' capacity to process threats and assess costs as well as on their sensitivity to the threatened punishment—three of the most important dimensions of rationality—whether or not Iran will behave as a "rational actor" has become an important dimension of the Israeli debate about a nuclear Iran.

One view of this issue sees it as very probable that Iran's leaders will be tempted to actually launch nuclear weapons against Israel regardless of the costs incurred. It rejects the applicability of the "rational actor" premise to the case of Iran, regarding the country's leaders as Muslim fanatics who view the purging of Zionists from the Holy Land as a religious obligation and who would not pass up the opportunity provided by nuclear weapons to achieve this goal, regardless of the costs entailed by the certain Israeli nuclear retaliation.

Opponents of this view argue that there is very little if any evidence supporting the proposition that Iran's leaders are irrational actors. They emphasize that a judgment of whether or not these leaders can be presumed to behave rationally should be based on the record of their past behavior and not on these leaders' rhetoric. More to the point, those who take this position argue that there is no evidence that Iran's leaders are insensitive to the extremely high costs associated with nuclear retaliation.<sup>5</sup> Hence, should the efforts to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons fail, Israel would, according to this view, be able to rely on its ability to deter a nuclear Iran, just as the Soviet Union was deterred during five decades of the Cold War.<sup>6</sup> This less alarming assessment has clear policy implications: If the worst case with regard to a nuclear Iran is unlikely to materialize, the costs of taking military measures to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons should be weighed very carefully against the risks associated with such measures.

## What Other Ramifications Would There Be?

There seems to be a broad consensus that even if Iran were to behave as a rational actor, its acquisition of

nuclear weapons would have a negative effect with regard to Middle East security. In the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, such a development would be expected to tip the Middle East balance of power further in Iran's favor and might well encourage it to take bolder action in the region. Moreover, its allies—Syria, along with non-state actors like Hezbollah and Hamas—are expected to be emboldened by an Iranian nuclear umbrella, leading them to ever more reckless behavior. In addition, alarmed by the security and political implications of Iranian nuclear weapons, countries like Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia would be expected to react by attempting to acquire nuclear weapons of their own, thus triggering a proliferation cascade. Finally, Israel might well react to Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons by adopting a more overt posture of deterrence. According to this thinking, even if Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons did not lead Egypt and Saudi Arabia to develop nuclear weapons of their own, they would surely be propelled to do so in reaction to the expected change in *Israel's* posture.

A less alarming view regards these expected ramifications of a nuclear Iran as far from self-evident. Syria is currently in no position to take advantage of an Iranian nuclear umbrella, goes this argument, and the presence or absence of Iranian nuclear weapons is unlikely to affect the decision on the part of outside powers as to whether or not to intervene in the present chaos in Syria; they seem to be deterred by far lesser considerations. It is also far from clear, in this view, in what ways such weapons would embolden Iran's non-state allies. Would the latter have any basis for expecting that in reacting to their possibly more emboldened behavior, Israel would be constrained by Iran's possession of nuclear weapons? For example, would Israel believe that Iran would launch its nuclear weapons if Israel reacted strongly to a Hezbollah cross-border attack?

Finally, Israelis less alarmed by Iran's possible acquisition of nuclear weapons argue that it is likewise not obvious that Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia would follow Iran's nuclear path. Turkey is a member of NATO and as such enjoys NATO's nuclear umbrella, and the recent decision to station an advanced NATO radar system on Turkey's soil is part of a broader Turkish participation in a NATO defense system against ballistic missiles. To avoid a proliferation cascade, the U.S. may well offer Egypt and Saudi Arabia a nuclear umbrella of its own—an alternative both countries may regard as less expensive than acquiring their own nuclear weapons and equally if not more robust—just as a similar U.S. umbrella afforded South Korea has helped dissuade it from reacting unilaterally to North Korea's nuclear arsenal.

## Is There Time?

Of course, another possibility that has been raised of acting to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons is by attacking its nuclear installations. One question being debated in this context is how much time is still left to test the capacity of *non*-military measures—diplomatic isolation, increasingly punitive economic sanctions, cyber attacks, and other low-signature physical measures, such as the assassination of key Iranian scientists—to prevent Iran from obtaining such weapons.<sup>7</sup>

The most important concept associated with this debate was introduced on November 20, 2011, by Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak. Barak implied that for the purpose of addressing this issue, the relevant time frame is not how far Iran is from actually obtaining nuclear weapons but, rather, how close Iran is to entering what he called “a zone of immunity”—a threshold after which it would no longer be possible to apply military means to effectively halt Iran’s nuclear program.<sup>8</sup> What would constitute such a threshold? In the closing months of 2011, it became increasingly common to associate Iran’s entering Barak’s “zone” with the shifting of more of its uranium enrichment activities to the underground facility in Qom, as well as with the moving *to* Qom of more of the uranium previously enriched in Natanz. Thus, Ehud Barak seemed to be implying that a military operation designed to abort Iran’s nuclear efforts after the facility in Qom became fully operational would be either physically impossible or so costly as to render it prohibitive.

Another important development that could be viewed as determining how much time would still be left to test the efficacy of *non*-military measures concerns Iran’s efforts to enrich uranium to a level of 20 percent. Proponents of *this* threshold argue that the difficulties associated with enriching uranium diminish exponentially as the level of enrichment increases—so that the most demanding task is to enrich from zero to 3.5 percent; enriching from 3.5 percent to 20 percent is much less demanding; and getting from there to the production of 90-percent-enriched weapons-grade material is comparatively easy.<sup>9</sup> Viewed from this perspective, given that Iran has already commenced enrichment to a level of 20 percent and that it will likely now enrich to this level ever greater quantities of uranium, it will very soon be impossible to ascertain that Iran has not already produced a few nuclear weapons’ worth of fissile material. If that is so, the implication is that there is actually very little time left to test the potential of *non*-military means, however harsh, to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

This assessment is contested by others who argue that low-signature efforts to halt Iran’s nuclear efforts have been remarkably effective, thereby buying more time to further explore the effectiveness of other *non*-military means. The delays gained through these efforts, coupled with Iran’s growing international isolation and the increasing toll of more biting sanctions—particularly those targeting Iran’s banking and energy sectors—may indeed cause Iran’s leaders to reconsider the wisdom of continuing to pursue their nuclear project. Indeed, by mid-January 2012 even Israel’s Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, acknowledged that recent sanctions might be causing some rethinking in Tehran.<sup>10</sup>

## What Can Be Achieved?

As we have seen, the efficacy of a possible Israeli or U.S. attempt to abort Iran’s nuclear program by militarily striking its nuclear installations is very much part of the conversation. What would such a strike achieve? One side of this debate argues that a military strike of this sort is an extremely demanding operation, the results of which are highly questionable and uncertain. Those on this side point out that such a strike cannot be equated with Israel’s 1981 strike against Iraq’s Osirak reactor or its 2007 destruction of Syria’s secret nuclear reactor: Both of these involved single, above-ground installations, whereas Iran’s program comprises dispersed facilities, a number of which are underground. Given Iran’s more complex program and partly fortified facilities, this side contends, striking these facilities will achieve only a temporary delay in the program, measured in a few years at most. It will also, it is argued, push Iran’s leaders to redouble their efforts to go nuclear, and to install all the new facilities they construct in the future underground, where they will be fortified and immune to future military strikes. Finally, opponents of a military strike assert that in any case, such a strike can hit only Iran’s *known* nuclear facilities; it is impossible to destroy facilities the locations of which are not known.

By contrast, proponents of a military strike argue that it is nearly impossible to predict how much time will be gained by destroying Iran’s nuclear facilities. They point out that in the case of both of Israel’s previous attempts to abort nuclear efforts militarily—in Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007—much more time was gained than even the architects of the strikes had predicted or assumed—because other developments intervened to make it difficult for the two countries to restore or replace their bombed facilities.

## Effects in Iran and the Region

A third debate associated with a possible military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities concerns its possible effects on Iran's domestic scene and on the Middle East at large.<sup>11</sup> Opponents of a strike argue that it would most probably ignite a regional war, as Iran would activate its allies in the region—primarily Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas—to retaliate against such a strike by leveraging the means provided to them over the years by Iran to inflict upon Israel considerable pain and suffering.<sup>12</sup> In turn, Israel's likely reaction to such a strike—imposing a very heavy toll on the infrastructure of Lebanon and Gaza (in accordance with the so-called “Dahiya Doctrine”)—could be expected to further complicate its relations with important regional players, notably Egypt and Turkey, and would predictably result in broad Arab public condemnation of Israel's behavior. And the significance of that reaction might be magnified as a consequence of the Arab Spring, as Arab public opinion may now for the first time actually matter.

Opponents of a strike also argue that within Iran, a strike would result in a “rallying around the flag” and a closing of the ranks behind the ruling regime. Thereby, they assert, it would stifle any prospects of “regime change” in Iran: a change that is regarded by some opponents of a strike as possible, given the degree of discontent prevailing in Iran, especially among its large minorities—and as the only long-term way of rendering Iran's nuclear program less dangerous.

Others, however, question the pessimistic premises of this argument regarding the likely regional ramifications of a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities. They point out that neither the 1981 Israeli strike against Osirak nor its destruction of Syria's facility in 2007 led to any negative regional reaction. Indeed, they remind us, Arab governments reacted to the latter bombing with deafening silence. Moreover, proponents of a strike argue, if Syria did not retaliate against the destruction of its own nuclear facility in 2007, it is unlikely to retaliate against an attack on Iran's nuclear installations. And more tellingly, these proponents ask: If *Arab countries* did not react to the destruction of Syria's nuclear facility, why would they react to the bombing of the nuclear facilities of Iran—a non-Arab country? Indeed, proponents of a strike claim, the opposite may prove to be the case: Arab countries that are worried about Iran's influence in the region would most likely, even if quietly, cheer a setback to Iran's nuclear and broader regional ambitions.

## The U.S. Dimension

A particularly important facet of the Israeli debate regarding a possible military strike against Iran's nuclear installations concerns longstanding United States objections to such a strike. Regarding this issue, two parallel debates are taking place, in Israel and the U.S. In the U.S., the focus is on preventing Israel from acting prematurely, while at the same time attempting to assess whether or not Israel may present the U.S. with a *fait accompli* by striking Iran's nuclear installations unilaterally.<sup>13</sup> In this context, it is difficult to ascertain whether leaks to the effect that Israel has refused to assure the U.S. that it would not take such action without consulting Washington, or the statement made by General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to the effect that the U.S. cannot be sure that Israel will not act unilaterally, reflect reality, or are simply designed to allow the U.S. some plausible deniability—that is, some ability to argue that it was not complicit in any action that Israel does take.

On the Israeli side, an important aspect of the debate is whether or not Israel's government can ignore U.S. objections to a military strike.<sup>14</sup> For a number of years this question had a clear operational dimension: As long as U.S. forces occupied Iraq and the Persian Gulf, there was some question whether it was at all possible for Israeli planes to fly through an area considered a U.S. “theater of operations” without prior clearance by U.S. air controllers. Since the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, however, the focus has shifted to the broader political-strategic dimensions of the question: Given the close cooperation between the Israeli and American defense communities and the continued vulnerability of U.S. forces in the region to Iranian retaliation—with some two hundred thousand American troops stretched from Oman to Afghanistan—can Israel ignore America's insistence that the non-military options for dissuading Iran from producing nuclear weapons have not been exhausted, and that there is still time to test whether they might work?

As with other aspects of the debate about the ramifications of Iran's nuclear efforts, there are two sides to this issue as well. One side, which views Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons as a catastrophe that places Israel's very survival at risk, argues that there are times when a nation must take self-preservation measures despite the displeasure of its closest allies. Words to that effect were reportedly uttered by Israeli Defense Minister Barak in testimony he gave on November 1, 2011, to the Knesset Committee on Finance.<sup>15</sup> In this view, the U.S. would need to accept the proposition that should all other measures to prevent Iran

from obtaining nuclear weapons fail, Israel would be justified in taking unilateral military action to abort Iran's nuclear designs.

Others argue, however, that an Israeli military strike against Iran's nuclear installations is unwise so long as the U.S. adamantly opposes such a strike. Underlying this position is the conviction that there is too much at stake: U.S.-Israeli defense ties are very tight, and Israel would continue to depend on the U.S. for military assistance. Even after the withdrawal of its troops from Iraq, the U.S. remains extremely exposed to Iranian retaliation—either directly against its forces in the area or by Iran's attempting to ignite a broader conflict in the region—so an Israeli strike would harm U.S. interests in the region and would place many U.S. lives at risk. And while in an election year America's political reaction to such a strike may be mitigated by domestic political considerations, the reaction of the U.S. defense community to an Israeli military strike might be extremely negative, as such an action might be seen as representing Israeli insensitivity to and disregard of U.S. priorities and concerns.

U.S. efforts to affect the Israeli debate on this issue seem to be multifaceted. Two U.S. Secretaries of Defense, Robert Gates and now Leon Panetta, as well as the U.S. Joint Chiefs, have used every conceivable channel to convey their priorities and concerns to their Israeli counterparts. The same officials also took pains, however, to convey to Israelis that they take the Iranian nuclear threat very seriously, that they regard it as one of America's top security challenges, and that they fully understand Israeli concerns about this matter. In doing so, the U.S. seems determined to prevent Israel from feeling that it is alone in facing the Iranian nuclear threat, and therefore has no choice but to act unilaterally.

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As this Brief makes clear, the Israeli debate about Iran's efforts to obtain nuclear weapons and about the merits of an effort to prevent such acquisition by bombing Iran's nuclear installations is complex and multifaceted. Israelis' thinking on these issues is far from monolithic; the various aspects of the problem are being debated at the highest echelons of the Israeli leadership and of the country's defense community. This is only apt, of course, given the critical ramifications for Israel both of Iran's progress in its nuclear program and of Israel's various possible responses to it.

The outcome of this debate will continue to be affected by developments in Iran, in Israel, in the U.S., and in the Middle East at large. By exposing the various facets of the Israeli debate on this issue, this Brief has sought to provide a map for following its future evolution in the weeks and months to come.

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