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## Israel and Iran

### From War of Words to Words of War?

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#### Summary

- *Israel sees Iran as an existential threat: while Israel would like the nuclear issue to be resolved diplomatically, it would also seriously consider resorting to military action.*
- *An Israeli military operation against Iran would hurt Israel's long-term interests. It would be detrimental to Israel's overall security and the political and economic consequences would be dire and far-reaching.*
- *Iran might retaliate to an Israeli attack by launching missiles against Israeli population centres.*
- *If diplomacy fails, Israel could consider open deterrence instead of the military option.*

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#### Introduction

The first task in assessing the unfolding crisis over Iran's nuclear programme is to distinguish between rhetoric and substance, perception and reality, and potential as opposed to actual threat. This paper aims to explore international perceptions of the challenges deriving from the Iranian nuclear programme, especially in the US and Israel, and the measures which might be taken to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear military capability. Its main focus is on Israeli perceptions and decision-making in this developing crisis and the potential consequences of Israel's policy options in its efforts to stop Iran from becoming a military nuclear power. The paper will also consider this issue in relation to US perceptions of the threat and potential courses of action by the US.

Clearly there is an increasing sense in the international community that both the United States and Israel see Iran as an immediate and imminent threat to their national interests, and as a result there is a growing belief that one or other of them, or both in cooperation, will launch a military strike at Iran, targeting its nuclear installations and other strategic assets. This paper will argue that of all the options available to the US and Israel, the military option is the least desirable, and might push an already volatile Middle East into further hostilities, uniting anti-Western groups worldwide against the United States, Israel and their allies while isolating moderate Muslim forces. The arguments are based on the assumption that a military operation by Israel would be more limited than one launched by the US and would aim at causing damage to Iran's nuclear facility without eradicating it; and moreover, that even a wider US operation would not be directed at regime change, Iraqi-style, but would concentrate on Iran's nuclear programme and delivery capabilities.

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### Perception of threat

The adoption of a radical foreign policy after a revolution is not unique to Iran. Most revolutionary regimes tend to do this, and it is a reflection both of their commitment to exporting their ideology and of their insecurity in the face of real or imagined adversity. The latter became a major feature of Iran's relations with the world after the toppling of the Shah in 1979 and the subsequent establishment of an Islamic republic. Almost overnight, two of Iran's closest allies, the United States and Israel, were transformed into sworn enemies in the eyes of the new regime. Israel was branded the *Small Satan* by Ayatollah Khomeini – a state for which he felt only marginally less animosity than for the United States, the *Great Satan*. In a recent demonstration to mark the 28th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, an enormous balloon was launched, bearing the slogan 'Down with the USA, down with Israel'.<sup>1</sup>

Not surprisingly, the fast-widening rift between Iran and Israel soon affected the protracted conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, and also that between Israel and Hizbullah, the Lebanese-based anti-Israeli movement founded in 1982. Iran encouraged Palestinian militancy and opposed any peaceful solution between Israel and its neighbours. The victory of the Islamist militant fundamentalist movement Hamas in the Palestinian elections of January 2006 complicated things further. Hamas receives support from Iran and there are some in Israel who see it almost as an extension of the regime in Tehran, and of the more extreme elements in it. Therefore, the shift in power from Fateh to Hamas was seen in Israel not only as a radicalization of Palestinian society, but also as the encroachment of Iran closer to Israeli borders.

Similarly, the conflict between Israel and Lebanon in summer 2006 underlined for many in Israel and the US that Iran's increased involvement in the Arab–Israeli conflict is not only ideological or inspirational, but also tangible, posing a real danger. Up to that point Iran's active political, military and financial support for Hizbullah had been seen as a constant irritation along Israel's northern border, one for which Israel held Iran responsible. Now Hizbullah and its Iranian patron are perceived as posing a strategic threat from inside Lebanon. Despite the fact that Israel employed its military might for 34 days to defeat Hizbullah, killing more than a thousand Lebanese and inflicting a devastating blow to the country's infrastructure, Hizbullah came out of the conflict politically strengthened, enhancing Iranian influence both in Lebanon itself and throughout the arena of the wider Arab–Israeli conflict. The conflict began with an act of provocation by Hizbullah: the kidnapping of two soldiers from within Israel. This was followed by the launch of thousands of rockets which landed no more than 40 kilometres from Tel Aviv, resulting in the deaths of 43 civilians and injury to hundreds more. The conflict ended with Hizbullah's leader Hassan Nasrallah declaring victory and Israel going through a soul-searching process about its inability to defeat a few-thousand-strong militia supported by Syria and Iran.

### The nuclear threat

The Iranian nuclear programme, widely seen by the international community as aimed at developing a nuclear military capacity, rather than for civilian purposes alone, as Iranian officials have repeatedly claimed, is a very dangerous dimension of the already strained and rapidly deteriorating relations between Tehran on the one hand and Washington and Jerusalem on the other. Concerns about the programme, combined with the inflammatory rhetoric from Iran's President Ahmadinejad and other Iranian leaders, mean that the likelihood of military action by Israel against Iran's nuclear

installations is increasing every day the International Community does not act, although this is not Israel's or the United States' preferred option. Both would prefer Iran to dismantle its nuclear programme altogether, but Israel may be satisfied if Iran accepts tight international supervision to ensure that it stops enriching uranium to weapons grade and that its nuclear programme does not accomplish the development of nuclear weapons.

In January 2005, the head of Israel's intelligence agency Mossad, Meir Dagan, warned the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee that Iran's nuclear programme was close to the 'point of no return',<sup>2</sup> where Tehran would no longer need outside or international help to enrich uranium for use in atomic weapons. Meanwhile the then Deputy Prime Minister, Shimon Peres, concluded that Iran is 'single-handedly the world's most serious security threat'.<sup>3</sup> Israel's conclusions differ little from those of Washington, namely that Iran has become the greatest threat to stability in the Middle East.

Clearly, the Iranian nuclear programme takes animosity, strategic rivalry and perceived threat to a completely new level. Israel has genuine concerns about Iran's developing weapons of mass destruction and its intentions, but has always had an interest in internationalizing the problem, rather than addressing the issue on its own. Mobilizing the international community to address this, whether through peaceful diplomacy, sanctions or even military action, would spare Israel from confronting Iran directly. Since Israel has no diplomatic leverage on Iran and cannot hurt it economically, the decision-makers in Jerusalem might come to believe that their only option, if international efforts fail to halt the Iranian nuclear programme, is a military strike, probably by air. Former Chief of Staff Dan Halutz, when asked how far Israel was willing to go to stop the Iranian programme, replied 'Two thousand kilometres'<sup>4</sup> – roughly the distance between Israel and Iran's nuclear facilities at Natanz and Esfahan.

To improve its intelligence-gathering capabilities, Israel has launched a satellite which can take clear photographs of locations around the world, including in Iran.<sup>5</sup> Yet, Israel is well aware that a military strike on Iran would be very complex and have no guarantee of success; that it has no capacity to destroy the entire Iranian nuclear infrastructure; and that the response in the wider Middle East and Islamic world, especially in the short term, might be severe. While the international community might not be sorry to see the Iranian nuclear programme suffer a serious setback, most would be quick to condemn Israel for acting unilaterally, for risking an Iranian reaction and endangering international stability. Various countries, either individually or collectively, might look for ways to retaliate and punish Israel.

Israel's policy, as expressed by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, is to present the threat of a nuclear Iran as a challenge to the whole international system. Olmert said in an interview in April 2006 that Israel should not be at the forefront of this conflict, and emphasized the danger posed by Iran to the 'well-being of Europe and America just as much as it is [to] the state of Israel'.<sup>6</sup> He even declared that 'To assume that Israel would be the first to go into a military confrontation with Iran represents a misunderstanding of this issue.'<sup>7</sup>

In a speech on 24 January 2007 to the Herzliya Conference, regarded as setting the Israeli agenda for the year to come, the Prime Minister put the Iranian issue at the top of the country's priorities. He made it clear that for the state of Israel, Iran poses a real threat, and that 'there is not one among us who does not sense the dangers inherent in this threat, not only to Israel, but also to the future of the region and the stability of the world order'.<sup>8</sup> Although Olmert was still at pains to emphasize the need for international action, his speech was laced with intimations that if the international community failed to stop Iran, Israel would take the necessary

steps to do so. 'We have the right to full freedom of action to act in defense of our vital interests. We will not hesitate to use it. I do not suggest that anyone mistakes our restraint and responsibility, or presumes that it will harm our determination and capability to act when necessary.'<sup>9</sup>

Two further points are worth noting in examining the potential Israeli reaction to the Iranian nuclear threat: the precarious standing of the current Israeli government and the lack of genuine insightful public debate on an issue with such far-reaching repercussions for the long-term well-being of the country.

It is less than a year since the formation of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's coalition government, yet it faces an uncertain future. The war in Lebanon cast doubt on the entire decision-making process in Israel and the competence of both the army and the government, especially of Olmert and his Defence Minister Amir Peretz. The Israeli government appointed a commission of inquiry, chaired by retired judge Elyahu Winograd, which set out to investigate and draw lessons from the débâcle of the Israel-Hizbullah conflict. The interim report of the commission is expected in early March and has the potential to cause a political earthquake in Israel.

Can a government under investigation for an earlier failure in war initiate another one? Logic dictates not, especially when the army itself is regrouping after the resignation of its commander General Halutz and other senior generals who were forced out. Both Olmert and Peretz, the leaders of the two main parties in the coalition, face calls to accept responsibility and resign. Even members of Peretz's Labour Party are demanding he resign. However, weak governments can be more adventurous than stable ones, and herein may lie danger. A successful operation in Iran might be a useful way to bury other bad news. Furthermore, there is also real concern among the Israeli decision-makers about Iran's progress towards acquiring nuclear weapons. The scenario of Israel attacking Iran to shift the focus from the government's problems, while unlikely, should not be completely disregarded. In the next few months the Israeli government might see changes in key positions and there could possibly even be fresh elections.

More worrying is the lack of public debate on a topic which is perceived as existential. Perhaps there is no debate precisely because the threat is seen as existential. Much is said and written without questioning the basic assumption of the magnitude of the threat and whether the government should take any possible measure to stop Iran developing a military nuclear capability. This is a real worry in a democracy. There is total concentration on the potential danger from Iran, but complete indifference to the potential fallout if military action were to take place, whether successful or not. This might be because most see this option as remote and as nothing more than muscle-flexing with the aim of encouraging the international community to act. In any case, when it comes to security issues, too much confidence is placed in the government and the security establishment despite the disastrous consequences of such an attitude in the past.

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## The war of words

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A rapid deterioration in relations between Israel and Iran followed the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President of Iran in June 2005. As the war of words escalated, Ahmadinejad called Israel a fake regime which cannot logically continue.<sup>10</sup> A few months later, addressing a conference in Tehran on 'The World Without Zionism', he said that Israel should vanish – the first time for many years that such a high-ranking Iranian official had expressed such a view.<sup>11</sup>

Ahmadinejad stressed that 'the establishment of the Zionist regime was a move by the world oppressor against the Islamic world'.<sup>12</sup> He went on also to cast doubt on whether the Holocaust had ever taken place, suggesting that Israeli Jews should go back and live in Europe.<sup>13</sup> More recently he declared that 'the Zionist regime is a rotten, dried tree that will be eliminated by a single storm'.<sup>14</sup> The Iranian Foreign Ministry organized a two-day 'conference' in December 2006 to examine whether the Holocaust had actually happened, playing host to well-known Holocaust deniers.

All of this could have been regarded as mere empty rhetoric, had not Iran been in the midst of a vigorous effort to enrich uranium and already in possession of a long-range missile delivery capability. Iran announced in April 2006 that it was in the process of building a 3,000-centrifuge cascade and aimed eventually to construct a 54,000-centrifuge cascade using P-1 technology and an unknown number of cascades with more advanced P-2 technology, which could potentially provide sufficient fissile material for nuclear bombs.<sup>15</sup> Iran has also developed the Shihab-3 and Shihab-4 missiles, with ranges of 1,300 and 2,000 kilometres respectively. Both can reach Israel. More recently it was reported that Iran had purchased longer-range missiles, BM-25s, from North Korea, with a range of 2,500 kilometres. Moreover, Iran is developing a missile that can carry a nuclear warhead. Despite all this information, the international intelligence community is uncertain about what stage the Iranian nuclear programme has reached, and how far it is from producing a weapon. The US assessment is that this will happen any time between two years and the middle of the next decade.<sup>16</sup>

Israeli decision-makers face a combination of extreme hatred expressed by the Iranian leadership, a call for the removal of the Jewish state, and the development of military capabilities which could potentially inflict a fatal blow on Israel. In Israel, Iran is portrayed as the country's biggest threat, and it is not rare to hear comparisons to the threat from Nazi Germany in the 1930s, which the international community failed to contain, with disastrous consequences. As much as Israeli politicians highlight the need for an international diplomatic effort, given the threat that Jerusalem perceives in Tehran's nuclear programme and its leaders' intentions, it is hard to imagine that if diplomatic efforts fail, Israel will stay idle.

However, it is not only Israel which has singled out Iranian activity in international affairs in general and more specifically as a threat to its national security and world stability; the same accusations have been made by Washington. On 9 March 2006, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice commented that 'Iran has been the country that has been in many ways a kind of central banker for terrorism in important regions like Lebanon through Hizbullah in the Middle East, in the Palestinian Territories, and we have deep concerns about what Iran is doing in the south of Iraq.'<sup>17</sup> For the Bush administration, as the President declared in his State of the Union address in January 2007, Iran is a major subversive force in the Middle East, which supports and encourages anti-American forces in the region, including Al-Qaeda and organizations in Iraq, and which the United States is determined to prevent from acquiring nuclear weapons.<sup>18</sup>

John Negroponte, Director of National Intelligence, was even more explicit in his January 2007 Annual Threat Assessment, asserting that Iran and North Korea were the states of most concern to the US because 'their regimes disregard international opprobrium, flout UN Security Council restrictions on their nuclear programs, pervert the legitimate purposes of governance, and ignore the needs and rights of their citizens'.<sup>19</sup> The assessment of the US intelligence community is that Tehran is determined to develop nuclear

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weapons despite its international obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and international pressure. Washington claims that the Iranians are using diplomatic efforts merely as a tool to protract negotiations rather than to reach an acceptable diplomatic solution.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the US believes that Iran is just biding its time until it can acquire nuclear weapons. Negroponte describes such developments as of 'grave concern to the other countries in the region whose security would be threatened by Iranian nuclear weapons'.<sup>21</sup>

In short, the Iranian threat is seen to operate on several levels. Iran is assumed to be developing nuclear weapons in contravention of international agreements; it is likely to have offensive biological weapons; it possesses a considerable number of ballistic missiles which might be used in the future as a platform for nuclear weapons; it provides funding, training and weapons (including rockets) to organizations that are regarded by the US and Israel as terrorist groups in Lebanon and Palestine. In addition, US officials constantly accuse the 'highest levels' of Iran's government of supplying increasingly sophisticated roadside bombs and other weapons to Iraqi insurgents.<sup>22</sup>

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## Non-military options

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What policy options are open to Israel and the US in the face of this situation? While the probability of Iran attacking Israel with nuclear weapons should be regarded as low, Israel will not discount this. Moreover, a greater danger to Israel and to other Western countries is the transfer of knowledge and technology to terrorist groups by rogue elements within the Iranian regime, which might end in a non-conventional terrorist attack. In either case Israel must carefully weigh the dangers and its response to them.

All options available carry with them considerable risk for Israel and for US interests and regional stability. However, in considering the choices open to Israel, this paper argues that the military option is likely to cause the most lasting damage for both Israel and regional stability. This is especially so when it seems that the continuous international pressure might be beginning to yield, albeit slowly and grudgingly, some softening in Iran's response to international demands.

### 1. Staying idle

The most unlikely policy option for Israel is that of doing nothing, and relying on the Arrow-2 ballistic missile defence system, which is already on high alert. In a recent exercise (conducted, by coincidence or not, on the 28th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution) Israel carried out a successful test of recent improvements to this anti-missile system at Palmachim air base in the centre of the country. A target simulating an incoming Iranian Shihab-3 missile was successfully intercepted at a higher altitude than previous efforts. While no system can offer absolute defence against incoming missiles, Arrow-2 would reduce the need for Israel to use force against the Iranian nuclear programme.

As mentioned above, there is a consensus among decision-makers and the public in Israel that the Iranian threat is existential in nature; hence it must be removed before the programme can reach a point of no return, whenever this might happen, and Israeli estimates are anything between a year and seven years.<sup>23</sup> The one, and probably the only, benefit of keeping a low profile is that the more discussion there is about the Iranian nuclear project, the more discussion there will be in the international community of Israel's assumed nuclear capability. A call for Israel to give up its nuclear weapons has even come from a friendly Arab source,

King Abdullah of Jordan, not to mention from other more critical voices around the world.<sup>24</sup> This is almost an inevitable consequence of the efforts to bring about an end to the development of nuclear weapons in Iran. Israel, which has never signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), seems to believe that it can shrug off any attempt to link the two issues. It is more concerned that if Iran is allowed to obtain nuclear weapons, a number of Arab states are likely to seek such weapons as well. Consequently the nature of the regional balance of power would change to Israel's disadvantage.

### 2. The international route

A second policy option, which for now seems to be the one Israel prefers, is to encourage, privately and not so privately, the international community to act before it is too late. Israel openly emphasizes the merit of diplomatic efforts, whether these be through the EU or the UN Security Council, to stop Iran's military nuclear programme. For instance, during a recent visit to China, Prime Minister Olmert urged President Hu Jintao to bring pressure on Iran to stop enriching uranium.<sup>25</sup> Although China is opposed to Iran's becoming a military nuclear power, it supports Iran's right to develop nuclear energy for civilian purposes. Indeed, Israel and the US may see the international community as moving too slowly in response to Iran's nuclear programme; nevertheless, some substantial achievements have been made in uniting the international community to pressure Iran to stop enriching uranium. In reality, while the pace might seem slow, diplomatic efforts are beginning to work more effectively than ever before.

The Israeli government is united not only in perceiving the Iranian threat as very serious but also in its desire to see the threat removed without military action. Vice Premier Shimon Peres has said recently that economic and political sanctions will bring Iran down to its real proportions.<sup>26</sup> Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, a moderate and a thoughtful politician, has raised the possibility of countering the Iranian threat through assembling a coalition of the moderates in the region and beyond.<sup>27</sup> She drew the demarcation lines in the Middle East as between religious extremism and moderate elements. However, this was presented in the vaguest of terms with no operation plan. Most importantly, she gave no indication how Israel would align itself with the moderate forces in the region without resolving the conflict with the Palestinians.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) referred Iran to the Security Council in February 2006 because of its many failures and breaches over international nuclear safeguards which 'constitute non-compliance' with reporting obligations under the NPT.<sup>28</sup> On 23 December 2006, international diplomatic efforts led the UN Security Council to adopt Resolution 1737. All 15 members of the Security Council declared that under Article 41 of the Charter's Chapter VII, 'Iran should, without further delay, suspend the following proliferation sensitive nuclear activities: all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, including research and development; and work on all heavy-water related projects, including the construction of a research reactor moderated by heavy water. The halt to those activities would be verified by the IAEA.'<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the Security Council decided that all states 'should prevent the supply, sale or transfer, for the use by or benefit of Iran, of related equipment and technology, if the State determined that such items would contribute to enrichment-related, reprocessing or heavy-water related activities, or to the development of nuclear weapon delivery systems.'<sup>30</sup>

For most of the period since the resolution was adopted, Iran has appeared to be in complete defiance of it, and the President has declared that his country will not cave in to bullying tactics or even invasion. However, in recent weeks

there seems to have been some softening of the Iranian position, raising the hope that Iran is ready to resume negotiations. In a speech on the 28th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, President Ahmadinejad reiterated his readiness to negotiate with the international community, though maintaining that his country would not halt its uranium enrichment programme.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Ali Larijani, Iran's top nuclear negotiator at the IAEA, declared that his country's nuclear programme was not a threat to Israel, and that Iran was prepared to settle all outstanding issues with the IAEA, including that of where future uranium enrichment trials might be conducted.<sup>32</sup> It would be naïve to believe that there has been a complete change of heart in Tehran; the 21 February deadline for the IAEA to report to the Security Council about Iran's compliance with Resolution 1737 was ignored by Iran and on that day Ahmadinejad stated, 'We ... will continue our work to reach our right [to nuclear technology] in the shortest possible time.'<sup>33</sup>

Despite the rhetoric from Tehran, Iran's mismanaged economy is vulnerable to international pressure. President Ahmadinejad was elected to improve the economy and eradicate corruption, not to pursue an antagonistic foreign policy towards large parts of the world. On 4 December 2006 the Iranian parliament, the Majlis, voted overwhelmingly to cut short his term in office by more than a year by holding the presidential elections alongside the upcoming parliamentary ones. Moreover, opponents of Ahmadinejad were successful in the local elections of 15 December 2006. Moderate conservatives opposed to him won a majority of the seats, followed by reformists ousting ultra-conservatives loyal to him. The results were widely seen as a response by the Iranian electorate to the President's constant power struggle with major international forces.

In January 2007, in an unprecedented action against a sitting president, 150 of the 290 members of the Majlis signed a letter blaming Ahmadinejad for raging inflation and high unemployment, and criticizing his travel abroad at time when he was due to present the Majlis with a draft budget for the coming fiscal year.<sup>34</sup> All this indicates that Iran's political system is more responsive to engagement with the world than is believed by many in the international community, especially in the US and Israel.

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## Military action

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It is likely that if diplomatic efforts and Security Council pressure fail to persuade Iran to comply with its international obligations, the US and Israel would feel that force is justified and might act militarily either together or separately, regardless of international consent. This could have disastrous consequences.

Few doubt the military capability of the US to inflict a deadly blow on the Iranian nuclear programme; it has built up massive air power both in Iraq and on carriers in the Gulf. However, Israel's military option should be scrutinized more carefully as its capabilities are more limited and its political position will be even more perilous in the region than that of the US if it attacks a Muslim country. Military action by either country would represent a very dangerous scenario with far-reaching regional and international implications, and one which might gather momentum should Israel sense that the Iranian nuclear project was developing too fast with no adequate international response.

Israel has insufficient military capability to destroy all Iran's nuclear programme, but its air force has, according to some defence analysts, the means to cripple it. Iranian nuclear facilities are within range of the Israeli Air Force (IAF)

following the delivery of 25 F15s and so far around 20 F16s (still far short of the 102 which will eventually be supplied by the US). Israel has also purchased 'bunker busters' to go with the F16. Consequently any operation will have to rely on the older types of F16 in addition to the newer model. Israel has very limited air refuelling capability, no aircraft carriers, and no realistic landing and refuelling permissions in the region unless it were to obtain American permission to refuel in Iraq. Such an operation, though possible, is extremely risky.

It is expected that in an air attack Israel would focus on sites such as the Natanz uranium-enrichment plant or the conversion plant at Esfahan. It would be a very complex operation which would require the IAF to stretch its resources to the limit, as well as requiring cooperation from a third country for a refuelling.<sup>35</sup> The route which Israeli airplanes might take to attack Iran is being widely discussed. According to one report, Israel sought US permission to fly over Iraq. This story was refuted by Israeli Deputy Defence Minister Efraim Sneh.<sup>36</sup> A Kuwaiti newspaper claimed that Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates have told the US that they would not oppose Israel's use of their airspace.<sup>37</sup>

It remains a possibility that Israel will act unilaterally, but it is a remote one, considering the distance of the targets, the dispersion of Iranian nuclear installations, the fortified nature of the sites and the possible response of Iran and the international community. It is more likely that such an operation would need US consent and cooperation. If successful, such a strike would delay the Iranian nuclear programme for a few years, but would have grave consequences, whether it was undertaken by Israel or the US acting separately or together.

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## The Iranian response

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Any such military action ought to take into account the possible Iranian reaction and wider responses around the world. Even if successful, a military operation against Iran might serve as a platform to unite all those in the international community who want to ostracize, impose sanctions upon or even destroy the state of Israel. Therefore any military planning in Israel and the US is bound to include an element of containment *vis-à-vis* such potential reactions. Furthermore, the response to an Israeli attack would not necessarily be identical to one carried out by the US.

An attack from the air might result in many Iranian casualties, both military personnel and civilians who work in the nuclear installations. President Ahmadinejad has already announced that Iran will 'cut the hand off any aggressor', but in practice the Iranian Air Force, which has between 20 and 30 F14A Tomcat fighters from the 1970s, would find it difficult to stop waves of attacks.<sup>38</sup>

However, Iran has at its disposal a range of options for retaliation. One possible scenario includes an immediate Iranian missile counterattack on Israel and on US bases in the Persian Gulf. Israel as a US ally has to take into account American interests in the region, and hence Iranian retaliation on US targets. Iran possesses up to 500 Shihab ballistic missiles of different types, with ranges varying from 300 to 2,000 kilometres and capable of carrying warheads of up to 1,000 kg. With these it could attack targets inside Israel as well as US targets in the Gulf, and US allies such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain. Iranian military retaliation would be likely to involve a missile launch on two of Israel's major population centres – the Tel Aviv and Haifa areas. This might result in a substantial loss of life. Furthermore, the Haifa bay area is home to a number of storage and fuel installations as well as petrochemical plants and an oil refinery. Any direct hit on

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these sites would cause a massive ecological disaster. It is unlikely that Iran would attack Jerusalem because of the danger of hitting holy sites, some of which are Islamic.

Another possible response could be for Iran to interrupt the free flow of oil through the Straits of Hormuz, thus preventing the export of oil from the Persian Gulf. It is estimated that 40% of the world's oil passes through the Straits. On 4 June 2006, Ayatollah Khamenei warned the US that if the crisis over Iran's nuclear programme escalates and 'if the Americans make a wrong move toward Iran, the shipment of energy will definitely be in danger, and the Americans will not be able to protect energy supplies in the region'.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, oil prices would increase dramatically.

This could be followed by Iran playing one of the strongest cards it holds against the United States – the active destabilization of Iraq and the provocation of a concentrated confrontation between US troops and the Shi'a majority in Iraq. As the insurgency in Iraq continues unabated and has proved difficult to contain even with a more limited Iranian involvement, a more sustained and determined effort, especially by the Revolutionary Guard, might render any of the US goals in Iraq even less achievable than they appear to be at present, and would also result in many more casualties among the Multinational Force in Iraq.

Iran could also attempt to destabilize Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states with a significant Shi'a population, not to mention encouraging Hizbullah in Lebanon to violate the ceasefire with Israel and launch a series of rocket attacks on northern Israel. Though the latter's capabilities were badly damaged during last summer's conflict with Israel, efforts to rearm Hizbullah have not stopped and may once again pose a threat to large parts of Israel.

It is within Iran's capability, in addition, to retaliate by sponsoring worldwide terrorism and hitting Israeli and US targets. According to some reports, Iran has already armed, trained, financed, inspired and organized dozens of violent groups since the Islamic Revolution, including Hizbullah, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. One of the most likely consequences of an Israeli military operation against Iran might be the latter's encouragement of Palestinian militants and Hizbullah in Lebanon, including supplying both with more sophisticated weapons. Moreover, Iran can target Israeli and Jewish targets abroad, as it was suspected of doing in the past. It has been alleged that Iran supports other militant groups in the Persian Gulf region, Africa, and Central Asia.<sup>40</sup> This support may increase should there be an attack on Iran's nuclear sites.

Such unilateral attacks would have far-reaching implications for the international community as a whole, especially if such an operation were to be conducted by the US. The US has lost much credibility and legitimacy as a result of going to war in Iraq without a second Security Council resolution, and as a consequence of the mess it has created in that country. Any similar performance in Iran would further damage its interests and image in the world. It would also inflict long-lasting damage on a concerted international effort to bring about the peaceful resolution of an international problem. The damage to the credibility of the United Nations and the IAEA would be grave; it would further lessen the authority of these institutions, rendering the idea of collective security meaningless. Severe damage to US international standing would almost equate to direct damage to Israel's national interest because of the two countries' close informal alliance. US political-diplomatic power and legitimacy in world politics have a considerable bearing on Israel because of the comprehensive US support it enjoys in the international arena.

If Israel were to carry out an attack on Iran there is no doubt that the international community would condemn Israel

for acting unilaterally. Israel would face international criticism; some countries might recall their ambassadors; some might even sever diplomatic ties. Israel is also vulnerable to economic sanctions, especially with its main trade partner, the European Union. There would be calls, especially from the Arab world and probably beyond, to punish Israel, whether through the Security Council or regardless of it. Israel traditionally believes that these kinds of response are always short-lived. From an Israeli perspective, such a risk might be worthwhile to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. However, this attitude might prove somewhat complacent if Israel were subsequently attacked by Iranian missiles and the region shifted towards the more extreme anti-Israel camp.

Any military operation against Iran, as well as involving many casualties, would enhance the appeal of extremism in the Muslim world, inside and outside Iran, at the expense of the moderates. It would be perceived by Muslims worldwide as another assault on Islam, as was the case in Iraq and in Lebanon. Moderates, even if far from subscribing to Iranian policies and ideology, would be put in an untenable position, which would force many to oppose any aggressor – especially Israel – which attacks a Muslim country and to rally around that country.

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### Another option for Israel

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The implications described above of a military operation against Iran should not conceal the fact that the failure of diplomatic efforts to stop Iran, without recourse to the military route, might result in proliferation. In other words Iran would acquire nuclear weapons.

Another option, therefore, though one which has not found support among Israeli decision-makers, is to change Israel's nuclear doctrine from one of ambiguity to openness, while accepting that other countries, including Iran, may acquire a nuclear capability. The chief objection to this is that it would then become more difficult, if not impossible, to stop others from doing so if they are determined enough, as in the case of North Korea. In this case Israel should clarify and define its response in the event of a nuclear attack, supported by international guarantees.

Deterrence of this sort might not work at the same level as during the Cold War, but on a state-to-state level it would still be satisfactory. The main problem with such an option is that the proliferation of nuclear technology and materials would increase the likelihood of such expertise and equipment ending up in the hands of rogue or terrorist elements not bound by the same rules of the game that all states, including Iran, abide by. The open deterrence option might be worth contemplating if it is conceded that diplomatic efforts are doomed to fail, yet the price of war is too high. In this case open deterrence would help to regulate the threats and dangers.

Kenneth Waltz, who in 1981 predicted nuclear proliferation, argues that 'A happy nuclear past leads many to expect an unhappy nuclear future.'<sup>41</sup> In other words, the fact the nuclear deterrence worked during the Cold War might not work as more countries join the nuclear race. Many assume that the new members of this exclusive club are not as rational and responsible as the founding members. However, Waltz claims that the use of nuclear weapons represents too high a cost in relation to any possible gains. An Iran with nuclear weapons will not interfere with the international nuclear balance of terror; hence it will be irrational for Iran to use these either as a threat or in practice. Waltz argues that nuclear weapons make miscalculated war even less probable because of the awareness of how lethal such weapons can be and the fallout, for both people and the environment,

resulting from their use. An open Israeli nuclear doctrine might also start a move towards negotiating arms control in the Middle East and the eventual removal of all weapons of mass destruction. Since WMDs generate fear because of what they can potentially do rather than because of their widespread use (they are rarely deployed), the proliferation itself becomes an incentive to disarm through negotiation.

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## Conclusion

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It is widely assumed that preparations for military action against Iran are well under way, in both the US and Israel. In conjunction with the escalation of the war of words between Tehran on one hand and Washington and Jerusalem on the other hand, Israel, the US and Iran might talk themselves into war.

However, it is also believed that Iran is still few years away from achieving a nuclear military capability, and the US has admitted that intelligence is weak on both Iranian intentions and the development of its nuclear programme. This should leave a wide enough window to pursue diplomatic efforts aimed at stopping Iran from acquiring nuclear capabilities. This will require painstaking negotiations involving both incentives

and sanctions in order to engage Iran in a constructive dialogue.

The complex dynamics of Iranian social and political structures leave enough room to encourage Iranian compliance with international norms. One of the more attractive incentives for Iran is the resumption of a diplomatic dialogue with the US after more than 28 years. Another diplomatic lever is Iran's desperate need for foreign investment to deal with its growing economic hardship, despite its income from oil.

In the coming months the main aim of the Security Council will be to combine constructive dialogue with the threat of sanctions to make progress in bringing Iran to comply with its international commitment to the Non-Proliferation Treaty by providing the required level of transparency and access.

Israel, as much as the US, is hoping that international efforts will halt the Iranian nuclear programme. However, both governments will have to decide if and when these efforts are doing no more than delaying matters and enabling Iran to bide its time and carry on developing nuclear weapons. At this point either Israel, with the tacit agreement of the US, or the US itself might decide to act unilaterally and strike. The outcome of such an action might delay Iran's nuclear programme for a while, but might also have grave consequences for Israel's long-term ability to secure its position in the region.

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