



# Israel and Iran's Nuclear Weapon Programme: Roll Back or Containment?

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## Abstract

The latest IAEA Report suggests that Iran is seeking a nuclear weapon capability. Preventing the Islamic Republic from becoming nuclear is the most important issue on Israel's agenda, and Jerusalem will do everything it can to prevent Tehran from acquiring a nuclear capability. Considering the limited impact of international sanctions and covert operations, it is therefore possible that at some point in the next 12-15 months Israel's policy-makers and military officials will decide whether or not to act militarily to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities. Though the probability of successfully destroying all of Iran's nuclear targets is not very high, Israeli policy-makers and military officials would nevertheless still be extremely satisfied with delaying Iran's nuclear programme. But would it be worth all the trouble it would inevitably unleash? While Israeli fears are understandable, given the heavy costs and poor chances for success of the military option, containment still represents the most sensible policy for Israel.

**Keywords:** *Israel / Israeli foreign policy / Israeli military policy / Iran / Iranian nuclear programme / Nuclear weapons / Arms control / Sanctions / Covert operations*

## Israel and Iran's Nuclear Weapon Programme: Roll Back or Containment?

by Massimiliano Fiore\*

### Introduction

Iran's nuclear programme is the most serious challenge to the viability of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).<sup>1</sup> While the Islamic Republic of Iran claims that its nuclear programme is meant only to generate electricity and provide fuel for medical reactors, American, European and Israeli officials believe that it is intended to produce nuclear weapons. And the most recent news appears to indicate that Iran *is* indeed seeking a nuclear weapon capability.<sup>2</sup>

After years of intensive investigation, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) revealed last month for the first time that 'it possesses evidence that Tehran has been conducting work on a highly sophisticated nuclear triggering technology that could be used only for one purpose: setting off a nuclear weapon'.<sup>3</sup> The IAEA also has information that Iran conducted 'design work and modelling studies involving the removal of the conventional high explosive payload from the warhead of the Shahab-3 missile and replacing it with a spherical nuclear payload'.<sup>4</sup>

While the totality of the evidence seems to suggest that Iran is seeking a nuclear weapon capability, questions remain about how close might Iran be to producing nuclear weapons.

On the one hand, Israeli Defence Force Military Intelligence Head Aviv Kohavi declared that 'based on Iran's infrastructure, technical know-how and amount of uranium, Tehran will have nuclear weapons within a year or two'.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper summarized the key points of the classified 2011 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iran in testimony before the Senate Intelligence

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<sup>1</sup> Unlike India, Israel and Pakistan, Iran signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968 and cannot escape now the consequences of its violations. George Perkovich with Silvia Manzanero, "Iran Gets the Bomb. Then What?", in Henry Sokolosky and Patrick Clawson (eds), *Getting Ready for a Nuclear-ready Iran*, Carlisle Barracks, U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2005, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub629.pdf>, p. 177-178.

<sup>2</sup> IAEA, *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and Relevant Provisions of Security Council Resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (GOV/2011/29), 24 May 2011, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2011/gov2011-29.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> William J. Broad and David E. Sanger, "Iran Reports a Major Setback at a Nuclear Power Plant", in *The New York Times*, 25 February 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/26/world/middleeast/26nuke.html>.

<sup>4</sup> IAEA, *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement* ..., *cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Gil Hoffman, "New Intel Head: Sanctions Don't Harm Iran Nuke Program", in *The Jerusalem Post*, 25 January 2011, <http://www.jpost.com/IranianThreat/News/Article.aspx?ID=205165>.

Committee in February, telling lawmakers that 'Iran is technically capable of producing enough highly enriched uranium for a weapon in the next few years'.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, former Mossad Chief Meir Dagan declared on his last day in office in January that 'Iran will not have nuclear weapons before 2015'.<sup>7</sup>

## 1. The History of the Iranian Nuclear Programme

Iran's nuclear programme, aimed at transforming the country into the dominant power in the Persian Gulf, began in the early 1970s, when the Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi signed agreements with West Germany and France to build four reactors, and with the United States to purchase eight reactors for generating electricity. Despite assertions that Iran's nuclear programme under the Shah was only for peaceful purposes, the Western intelligence community suspected that Reza Pahlavi intended to develop a nuclear weapon capability.<sup>8</sup> This concern led both Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter to seek an agreement that 'put non-proliferation controls over US supplied nuclear material'.<sup>9</sup> That is why the United States-Iran Nuclear Treaty, signed on 13 October 1978, closely restricted Iran's ability to produce any nuclear weapon capability using US supplied material without Washington's agreement.<sup>10</sup>

Iran's nuclear programme, however, came to a halt shortly after the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Many nuclear scientists left the country, while Western countries froze their agreements and withdrew their support for Iran's nuclear programme. It was only in the mid-1980s, when information about Iraq's nuclear efforts began to accumulate, that the Islamic Republic decided to restart the nuclear programme and turned to North Korea and China for assistance. Following the 1990-1991 Gulf War and the discovery that Iraq had come very close to acquiring a nuclear capability, Iran launched an extensive programme to develop an advanced nuclear infrastructure with potential military applications. It also signed, at the beginning of 1995, a cooperation agreement with the Russian Ministry of Atomic Energy to build lightweight water reactors for generating electricity.<sup>11</sup>

But, why would Iran want to have nuclear weapons? Despite fiery statements that Israel 'should be wiped off the map' by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the primary

<sup>6</sup> Greg Miller and Joby Warrick, "U.S. Report Finds Debate in Iran on Building Nuclear Bomb", in *The Washington Post*, 18 February 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/02/18/AR2011021805632.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Yossi Melman, "Outgoing Mossad Chief: Iran Won't Have Nuclear Capability Before 2015", in *Haaretz*, 7 January 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/outgoing-mossad-chief-iran-won-t-have-nuclear-capability-before-2015-1.335656>.

<sup>8</sup> Gawdat Bahgat, *Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2007, p. 21; US Intelligence Community, *Prospects for Further Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, Special National Intelligence Estimate 4-1-74, 23 August 1974, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB240/snief.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> William Burr (ed.), "US-Iran Nuclear Negotiations in 1970s Featured Shah's Nationalism and US Weapons Worries" in *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book*, No. 268 (13 January 2009), <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nukevault/ebb268/index.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> Shai Feldman, *Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control in the Middle East*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1997, p. 47-48; Gawdat Bahgat, *Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East*, *cit.*, p. 20-22.

motivation for Iran to restart the nuclear programme in the 1980s and to develop nuclear weapons in the 1990s was to ensure national survival by deterring a potential Iraqi aggression. However, after the 2001 Afghanistan War and 2003 Iraq War, many in Iran started considering the development of nuclear weapons even more essential to deter US threats and efforts to engineer a regime change in Tehran. Although the Taliban and Saddam Hussein were Iran's sworn enemies, the unprecedented American military intervention in the Middle East post 9/11 strengthened the perception that 'the United States would not hesitate to use its military superiority to contain an alleged threat of weapons of mass destructions (WMD) and to topple a regime that harbours such aspirations'.<sup>12</sup> It should, however, be noted that Iran's perception of encirclement is based on a stark reality: Washington has a strong military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, extensive naval support and logistical facilities in the Persian Gulf (Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Oman) and also a major airbase in Qatar.<sup>13</sup> Its growing animosity towards the Islamic Republic is also well known.

A nuclear weapon capability will reduce Iran's sense of vulnerability and - assuming that the clerical leaders are radical but sensitive to costs - will also enable a 'more constructive dialogue and a higher degree of stability'.<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding, a nuclear Iran - apart from threatening Israel and possibly deterring the United States from 'fulfilling security guarantees to regional states'<sup>15</sup> - might feel emboldened to exacerbate political tension in the region, especially in countries with large Shiite minorities and to step up support for its proxies (Hezbollah and Hamas), increasing the number of conventional conflicts and crises. 'Empowered militarily and politically and virtually immune to direct military threats, Iran would become', according to Ron Tira - a former fighter pilot in the Israeli Air Force with over twenty years of experience in Israeli Air Force intelligence and special operations - 'a dominant entity sending its tentacles forth from Iraq, through Bahrain, the Straits of Hormuz and Bab el-Manded, Yemen, the Horn of Africa, Sudan, Gaza and Lebanon, to Afghanistan and Central Asia'.<sup>16</sup> Even if it is unlikely that Iran will pass nuclear weapons to its proxies, they 'might take the nuclear umbrella for granted' and be more inclined to escalate minor conflicts with or without encouragement from Tehran.<sup>17</sup> Hence, the policy dilemma: whereas the Islamic Republic has good reasons to seek nuclear capability, the implications for the West and Israel of its success in this respect are grave.

<sup>12</sup> Gawdat Bahgat, *Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in the Middle East*, *cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Sverre Lodgaard, "Challenge from Within: The Case of Iran", in Olav Njølstad (ed.), *Nuclear Proliferation and International Order. Challenges to the Non-Proliferation Treaty*, London and New York, Routledge, 2011, p. 88.

<sup>14</sup> Dima Adamsky *et al.*, "The War Over Containing Iran: The Morning After in Israel", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 2 (March/April 2011), p. 155-168.

<sup>15</sup> Shahram Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006, p. vii.

<sup>16</sup> Ron Tira, "A Military Attack on Iran? Considerations for Israeli Decision Making", in *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (July 2010), <http://www.inss.org.il/upload/%28FILE%291279454147.pdf>, p. 54.

<sup>17</sup> James M. Lindsay and Ray Takeyh, "The Force Needed to Contain Iran", in *The Washington Post*, 21 February 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/19/AR2010021904255.html>; Eric S. Eldeman, Andrew F. Krepinovich Jr. and Evan Braden Montgomery, "The Dangers of a Nuclear Iran: The Limits of Containment", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 1 (January-February 2011), p. 66; Yossi Melman, "Are Subs, Not the Planes, the Best Way for Israel to Counter Iran?", in *Haaretz*, 30 June 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/features/some-israeli-security-experts-say-subs-not-planes-are-the-answer-to-iran-1.370406>; Dima Adamsky, 'The War Over Containing Iran: The Morning After in Israel', *cit.*

## 2. Preventing Iran from Becoming Nuclear

### 2.1. Diplomacy & International Sanctions

Shortly after taking office in January 2009, Barack Obama stated that the United States and five other countries (France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and China) were willing to conduct direct negotiations to address Iran's nuclear programme 'without preconditions'. Tehran initially agreed in principle, but then rejected the offer for an interim solution under which it would export most of its enriched uranium for processing.<sup>18</sup> And on 9 June 2010, the United Nations Security Council voted to impose the fourth round of sanctions on Iran.

Resolution 1929 banned Iran from participating in any activities related to ballistic missiles, tightened the arms embargo and travel bans on individuals involved with the programme and froze the funds and assets of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines. It also recommended that states inspect all Iranian cargo, prohibit the servicing of Iranian vessels involved in banned activities, halt the provision of financial services used for sensitive nuclear activities, closely watch Iranian individuals and entities when dealing with them, prohibit the opening of Iranian banks on their territory and prevent Iranian banks from doing business with their national banks if it might contribute to the nuclear programme, and prevent financial institutions operating in their national territory from opening offices and accounts in Iran.<sup>19</sup> 'The idea behind sanctions', declared Diana Gregor - a leading expert in European diplomatic and economic ties to Iran - in an interview to *The Jerusalem Post*, 'is to maximize the costs that Iran incurs due to its nuclear weapons development programme by simultaneously minimizing the benefits'.<sup>20</sup>

But, how susceptible is Iran to sanctions? International sanctions have hit Iran's economy quite hard, but have not had an impact either on the nuclear programme or on destabilizing the regime. Evidence of this is the recent announcement by the Head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, Fereidoun Abbasi Davani, that Tehran would triple the production of enriched uranium and would construct up to ten new enrichment sites in the coming years.<sup>21</sup>

This announcement is very disturbing for Israel and the West since it indicates that sanctions have not bent the country's will and that the Islamic Republic is not only 'continuing its nuclear programme at full speed but even accelerating the pace'.<sup>22</sup> With

<sup>18</sup> Although Turkey and Brazil announced on 17 May 2010 they had brokered a deal whereby Iran would ship a significant amount of its existing enriched-uranium stockpiles to Turkey for reprocessing, it did not satisfy the United Nations Security Council's concerns over the nature of the Iranian nuclear programme. Tony Karon, "Iran, China and Brazil Intensify the Nuclear Chess Game", in *Time.com*, 14 May 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1989359,00.html>; Andrew Lee Butters, "Iran's New Nuke Proposal: Progress, or Delaying Tactic?", in *Time.com*, 17 May 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1989665,00.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Full text of Resolution 1929 available at: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2010/sc9948.doc.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin Weinthal, "Are EU Sanctions Influencing Iran's Behaviour?", in *The Jerusalem Post*, 9 January 2011, <http://www.jpost.com/IranianThreat/News/Article.aspx?id=202757>.

<sup>21</sup> Yossi Melman, "All Signs Say Iran Is Racing Toward a Nuclear Bomb", in *Haaretz*, 23 June 2011,

<http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/the-arms-race/all-signs-say-iran-is-racing-toward-a-nuclear-bomb-1.369186>.  
<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

Iran determined not to give up its nuclear programme, and Israel equally determined to prevent Iran from becoming nuclear, where will all this end up?

## 2.2. Covert Operations

Preventing the Islamic Republic from becoming nuclear is the most important issue on Israel's agenda and Jerusalem will do everything it can to prevent Tehran from acquiring a nuclear capability. Western intelligence analysts claim that Israel is waging a covert war against Iran to delay or interrupt its nuclear research programme without engaging in a direct confrontation that could lead to a wider war.<sup>23</sup>

The most dramatic element of this campaign of covert operations is the assassination of important figures in the procurement and enrichment process in Iran and Europe, intended to deprive the Islamic Republic of key technical skills at the head of the programme. Since its creation, the Mossad has been involved in the most daring covert operations and the most cold-blooded assassinations.

Decapitating a hostile nuclear programme by taking out key human assets is a tactic that has proven its effectiveness over the years, particularly in the case of Egypt and Iraq.<sup>24</sup> The decades-long campaign to eliminate scientists working on missiles and weapons of mass destruction began in the early 1960s, when Israel learned that Egypt had built a secret facility in the desert staffed by German scientists with the aim of assembling approximately 900 missiles. Heinz Krug, the director of a Munich-based Egyptian front-company called Intra, was kidnapped from his office and presumably assassinated in September 1962.<sup>25</sup> Two months later, two parcel bombs arrived at the office of the missile project's director, Wolfgang Pilz, maiming his secretary and killing five workers. The following year, Hans Kleinwachter, an electronics expert who had worked on Adolf Hitler's V2 project during the Second World War, miraculously escaped an ambush in Switzerland, while Heidi Goerke (the daughter of Paul Goerke, a scientist working in Cairo) was threatened in Basel by two Mossad agents.<sup>26</sup>

On 14 June 1980, Yahya al-Meshad - an Egyptian-born metallurgist and a member of Iraq's Atomic Energy Commission - who was in Paris to complete arrangements with the French about the shipment of nuclear fuels to Baghdad, was murdered/stabbed fourteen times in his hotel room. And on 22 March 1990, Gerald Bull - a Canadian scientist involved in the procurement of weapons systems or components on behalf of Saddam Hussein - was found dead at the entrance of his home in Brussels.<sup>27</sup>

Fast forward to the present day, the Mossad is believed to be behind the assassinations of Ardeschire Hassanpour, a prize-winning nuclear scientist at Iran's

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<sup>23</sup> Philip Sherwell, "Israel Launches Covert War Against Iran", in *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 February 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/4640052/Israel-launches-covert-war-against-Iran.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Ian Black and Benny Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars: A History of Israel's Intelligence Services*, New York, Grove Weidenfeld, 1991, p. 194.

<sup>25</sup> Although Krug's body was never found, an anonymous phone call informed the police that he was dead.

<sup>26</sup> Ronen Bergman, "Killing the Killers. Israeli Hit Teams Have a History of Eliminating Weapon Scientists", in *Newsweek*, 13 December 2010, <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/12/13/killing-the-killers.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Ian Black and Benny Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars ...*, *cit.*, p. 334.

Isfahan Uranium Plant, who died in mysterious circumstances in 2007 from reported 'radioactive poisoning',<sup>28</sup> and of Majid Shahriari, a member of the nuclear engineering department of Shahid Beheshti University in Tehran, killed in a car bomb attack in 2010. The Islamic Republic also attributed the assassination of Massoud Ali-Mohammadi to the 'enemies of the nation', although opposition leaders accused the government of plotting the attack in order to spread fear in the capital.<sup>29</sup>

Beyond assassinations, the current covert campaign against Iran covers a wide range of activities: Israel has in fact also been using front companies and double agents to infiltrate the Iranian purchasing network that the Islamic Republic has set up to circumvent UN sanctions and acquire parts and material for the centrifuges at Natanz, and selling damaged equipment to the Iranians.<sup>30</sup>

The major damage caused to Tehran by these covert operations was the Stuxnet, 'the most sophisticated computer worm ever detected and analysed'.<sup>31</sup> According to figures compiled by David Albright of the Institute for Science and International Security, a Washington think tank that follows the Iranian programme closely, the attack slowed the centrifuges' operational capacity by 30 per cent over the past year. Of almost 9,000 installed centrifuges, less than 4,000 were reported to be operational at the end of 2009.<sup>32</sup>

President Ahmadinejad admitted for the first time in November 2010 that a computer worm had incapacitated some centrifuges, setting back the nuclear programme. 'Iran's enemies had been successful in making problems for a limited number of our centrifuges with software they installed in electronic devices'.<sup>33</sup> Iran also told atomic inspectors in February 2011 that it had run into a serious problem at the Bushehr reactor and was planning to unload nuclear fuel from there.

The reported object of this elaborated covert campaign is either to delay or interrupt Iran's research programme, without engaging in a direct confrontation that could lead

<sup>28</sup> Sarah Baxter, "Iranian Nuclear Scientist Assassinated by Mossad", in *The Sunday Times*, 4 February 2007, [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us\\_and\\_americas/article1324321.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/article1324321.ece); Julian Borger and Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Covert War Against Iran's Nuclear Aims Takes Chilling Turn", in *The Observer*, 5 December 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/05/iran-nuclear-experts-killings>.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Erdbrink, "Iranian Nuclear Scientist Killed, Another Injured in Tehran Bombings", in *The Washington Post*, 29 November 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/29/AR2010112901560.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Yossi Melman, "Computer Virus in Iran Actually Targeted Larger Nuclear Facility", in *Haaretz*, 28 September 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/computer-virus-in-iran-actually-targeted-larger-nuclear-facility-1.316052>; David E. Sanger, "Iran Fights Malware Attacking Computers", in *The New York Times*, 25 September 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/26/world/middleeast/26iran.html>; John Markoff and David E. Sanger, "In a Computer Worm, a Possible Biblical Clue", in *The New York Times*, 29 September 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/30/world/middleeast/30worm.html>; Guy Griland, "Welcome to the World of Cyberwar", in *Haaretz*, 11 October 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/business/welcome-to-the-world-of-cyberwar-1.318320>.

<sup>31</sup> A worm is a malicious software (malware) used to take advantage of loopholes in system defences to extract information or cause damage.

<sup>32</sup> Yossi Melman, "Computer Virus in Iran Actually Targeted Larger Nuclear Facility", *cit.*; David E. Sanger, "Iran Fights Malware Attacking Computers", *cit.*; John Markoff and David E. Sanger, "In a Computer Worm, a Possible Biblical Clue", *cit.*; Guy Griland, "Welcome to the World of Cyberwar", *cit.*

<sup>33</sup> William J. Broad and David E. Sanger, "Iran Reports a Major Setback at a Nuclear Power Plant", *cit.*

to a wider war.<sup>34</sup> A former CIA officer on Iran told *The Daily Telegraph* that 'the goal is delay, delay, delay until you can come up with some other solution or approach. We certainly do not want the current Iranian government to have those weapons. It is a good policy, short of taking them out military, which probably carries unacceptable risks'.<sup>35</sup>

However, despite Western intelligence assessments that both the campaign of assassination and sabotage had slowed or crippled Tehran's efforts, the IAEA reported last month that 'Iran is now producing low-enriched uranium at rates slightly exceeding what it produced before being hit by the computer worm'.<sup>36</sup>

The IAEA's report, the limited impact of sanctions on the nuclear programme and Iran's recent announcement about the acceleration of enrichment, seem to indicate that Tehran 'is racing toward a nuclear bomb'.<sup>37</sup>

It is therefore possible that at some point in the next 12-15 months Israel's policy-makers and military officials will need to decide whether or not to act militarily to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities. That would certainly be one of the most complicated decisions since the establishment of the State of Israel.<sup>38</sup>

Israel considers the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran an existential threat. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that 'the threat to our existence, to our future, is not theoretical. It cannot be swept under the carpet; it cannot be reduced. It faces us and all humanity and it must be thwarted'.<sup>39</sup> Vice Prime Minister and Strategic Affairs Minister Moshe Ya'alon declared in an interview to Russia's Interfax News Agency on 30 May that 'an Iran possessing nuclear weapons would be a threat to the entire civilized world' and that he hoped 'the international community would take joint action to avert the nuclear threat posed by Iran, even if it would be necessary to conduct a pre-emptive strike'.<sup>40</sup>

### 2.3. Assessing the Military Option<sup>41</sup>

In spite of the fact that many policy-makers and military officers in Israel acknowledge that Iran's clerical leaders are not suicidal and do not seek a military confrontation with Israel for fear of nuclear retaliation, they are convinced that under no circumstances

<sup>34</sup> Yossi Melman, "Is Israel Assassinating Iran Nuclear Scientists?", in *Haaretz*, 17 February 2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/is-israel-assassinating-iran-nuclear-scientists-1.270316>.

<sup>35</sup> Philip Sherwell, "Israel Launches Covert War Against Iran", *cit.*

<sup>36</sup> Greg Miller and Joby Warrick, "U.S. Report Finds Debate in Iran on Building Nuclear Bomb", *cit.*

<sup>37</sup> Yossi Melman, "All Signs Say Iran Is Racing Toward a Nuclear Bomb", *cit.*

<sup>38</sup> Massimiliano Fiore, "What Is Worse for Israel, Attacking or Not Attacking Iran's Nuclear Infrastructure?", in *The Heptagon Post*, 4 January 2011, [http://www.heptagonpost.com/Fiore/what\\_is\\_worse\\_for\\_israel\\_attacking\\_or\\_not\\_attacking\\_iran%27s\\_nuclear\\_infrastructure](http://www.heptagonpost.com/Fiore/what_is_worse_for_israel_attacking_or_not_attacking_iran%27s_nuclear_infrastructure).

<sup>39</sup> Isabel Kershner, "Israeli Strike on Iran Would Be 'Stupid', Ex-Spy Chief Says", in *The New York Times*, 8 May 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/09/world/middleeast/09israel.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Jerusalem Post.com Staff, "Ya'alon: Military Strike May Be Needed to Stop Iran Nukes", in *The Jerusalem Post*, 30 May 2011, <http://www.jpost.com/Defense/Article.aspx?ID=222906>.

<sup>41</sup> This section is based on Massimiliano Fiore, "What Is Worse for Israel, Attacking or Not Attacking Iran's Nuclear Infrastructure?", *cit.*; Ron Tira, "A Military Attack on Iran? Considerations for Israeli Decision Making", *cit.*, p. 51-56.



should the Islamic Republic be allowed to develop nuclear weapons. The reason is simple: given the security culture in the country, no Israeli decision-maker can risk allowing a bitter ideological enemy to acquire nuclear weapons. No matter how irrational an Iranian attack might look to analysts and experts worldwide and no matter how small a chance of an attack is, no Israeli political or military leader could accept the responsibility of living under the ultimate threat of a nuclear Armageddon.

Even without the use of nuclear weapons, the strategic context that would unfold with a nuclear Iran would be viewed as extremely threatening by Israel. A nuclear-armed Iran would in fact feel almost immune to military threats and emboldened to take more aggressive steps to change the regional balance of power and expand its influence not only in the Persian Gulf, but also in the Fertile Crescent, the Arabian Peninsula and in the Horn of Africa.

This is why Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak are allegedly seriously considering a military strike (even though by going public with the 2015 estimate, former Mossad Chief Dagan has made it more difficult for them to press the case for an attack). That is what Menachem Begin had done when Israel attacked Iraq's nuclear facilities in 1981, that is what Ehud Olmert did in 2007 when Israel attacked the Dayr el Zuhr facilities in Syria, and that is what Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak will most likely do in the case of Iran.

But, can Israel successfully destroy all Iran's nuclear installations? Striking Iran is much more complicated than striking Iraq or Syria. Whereas the latter's nuclear installations were concentrated in pockets away from populated areas and their governments lacked the capacity to retaliate, Iran's nuclear facilities are much more dispersed and well-protected (many are built underground) and the Islamic Republic has the capability not only to retaliate against Israel, but also to threaten the Dimona Nuclear Reactor. Moreover, the Israeli Air Force would have to fly 1,500-1,700 kilometres over Arab countries to reach Iran, destroy Iranian targets and then fly 1,500-1,700 kilometres back.

Though the probability of successfully destroying all of Iran's nuclear targets is not very high, Israeli policy-makers and military officials would nevertheless still be extremely satisfied with delaying Iran's nuclear programme. But the real question is: would it be worth all the trouble it would inevitably unleash?

Attacking Iran would mean an all-out war. The Islamic Republic's response is likely to be both harsh and long-term. It would retaliate by firing its ballistic Shahab-3 missiles against Israel's cities, military centres and nuclear installations. Additionally, its proxies (Hezbollah and Hamas) would be instructed to launch suicide and rocket attacks. During the 2006 Lebanon War, Hezbollah fired approximately 4,000 rockets, which paralysed the life of the country for over a month and drove hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens from their homes in the north. Since then, however, Hezbollah has replenished and enhanced its arsenal and it now allegedly has some 40,000 rockets. With no effective operational missile defence system (Iron Dome, Magic Wand and Arrow III are all still being developed), thousands of missiles and rockets would therefore fall on Israel, bringing the country's economy to a virtual halt and causing hundreds if not thousands of dead and wounded. What is more, an Israeli strike on Iran

would also sow instability throughout the Middle East, at a time in which the region is in profound flux. The Islamic Republic could disrupt the oil flow to the West by attacking oil facilities in the Gulf and/or mining the Straits of Hormuz. It could increase subversion inside Afghanistan, with the goal of driving the United States to withdraw its troops before schedule and preventing the emergence of a strong central Afghan government. It could, furthermore, strengthen its financial and military support for radical Islamic groups to subvert pro-Western governments in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. It is also very likely that the United States would be held responsible for the Israeli strike and therefore be subjected to attacks on its forces stationed in Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iraq, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Worse still, Iran could once again unleash international terrorism against Jewish and American targets not only in the Middle East, but also in Africa, Europe and Latin America.

## Conclusions

What is the greater risk for Israel then, a military strike on Iran within the next few months or a nuclear-ready Iran at the end of that period?

While it is certainly true that Israel 'does not have the luxury of choosing between a good and a bad alternative', one is left with the impression that containing a nuclear Iran is the lesser of two evils.<sup>42</sup> Lacking the military option and considering the limited impact of both international sanctions and covert operations, Israel should adjust to the new strategic environment and rely on its strategic deterrence in order to create a stable nuclear balance.<sup>43</sup> This would, however, require Israeli decision-makers to accept 'living under the constant threat of total annihilation and mutual vulnerability', something that runs against the very nature of Israel's security posture.<sup>44</sup>

While Israeli fears are understandable, given the heavy costs and poor chances for success, containment still represents the most sensible policy for Israel.

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<sup>42</sup> Ron Tira, "A Military Attack on Iran? Considerations for Israeli Decision Making", *cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>43</sup> One of the most important strategic developments in Israel's nuclear posture is the acquisition of a sea-based nuclear capability. Between 1999 and 2006, the Israeli Government purchased five submarines, specially designed to launch conventional torpedoes or nuclear cruise missiles. The five submarines give Israel the possibility of having two at sea simultaneously while the others are being serviced, ultimately providing a crucial second-strike capability. Yossi Melman, "Are Subs, Not the Planes, the Best Way for Israel to Counter Iran?", *cit.*

<sup>44</sup> James M. Lindsay and Ray Takeyh, "The Force Needed to Contain Iran", *cit.*; Eric S. Eldeman, Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr. and Evan Braden Montgomery, "The Dangers of a Nuclear Iran: The Limits of Containment", *cit.*, p. 66; Dima Adamsky *et al.*, "The War Over Containing Iran: The Morning After in Israel", *cit.*

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