

# Israel's Survival Instincts and the Dangers of Nuclear Weapons in Iranian Hands

By RICHARD L. RUSSELL

The Israeli body politic finds itself in a new and uncertain international security environment as it faces the prospect of an Iran armed with nuclear weapons. The American intelligence assessment that suggests Iran halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003 has not relieved Israeli fears. Tel Aviv probably worries that American intelligence on Iran's nuclear weapons program today is just as mistaken as it was on Iraq's suspected nuclear weapons program in the run-up to the 2003 war. The Israelis assess that Tehran is pressing ahead in its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons under the guise of a civilian nuclear power infrastructure.<sup>1</sup>

As Israelis grapple with policy options for dealing with the emerging Iranian threat, they do not like what they see. They find themselves "between a rock and a hard place,"

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Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad  
addresses UN General Assembly, September 2005

United Nations (Paulo Figueiras)

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knowing that there is a large gap between Israel's declarative policy that it will not allow hostile states in the region to acquire nuclear weapons and their military capabilities, which have substantial shortcomings that could impact the ability to hold at risk Iran's large and widely dispersed nuclear infrastructure, all of which is located a long reach from Israel.

Meanwhile, in debates and discussions in Washington on the creeping crisis over Iran's suspected nuclear weapons aspirations, one periodically hears mention of Tel Aviv's worries about Tehran. But Israel's interests and threat perceptions are mentioned merely in passing and generally receive no sustained or deep analysis. The American media, moreover, with their increasingly thin foreign coverage, rarely cover the Israeli dimension of the Iran crisis. In contrast, the threat posed by an Iran armed with nuclear weapons receives heavy coverage in Israeli media and fills the in-boxes of Israeli security officials and diplomats already heavily burdened by terrorism and the conflict with the Palestinians.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, a look at the Israeli dimension of the Iran nuclear crisis is in order. How do the Israelis view Iran? What dangers would Iranian nuclear weapons pose to the state of Israel? What are the Israelis doing today? What could they do tomorrow? And what would be the implications and consequences of Israeli security actions for American national security vis-à-vis Iran and the Gulf?

### Israeli Worry about Iran

Few in the business of foreign affairs have missed the steady stream of bellicose rhetoric coming out of the very loud mouth of Iran's *elected*—to use the word extremely generously and loosely—President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He shattered diplomatic decorum at the United Nations (UN) in his first major international address as a world leader in September 2005. As one commentator characterized the speech, “Ahmadinejad delivered what began as a sermon praising the prophets of Islam, Christianity and Judaism and then descended into anti-American vitriol, conspiracy theories and threats. He expressed doubt that the deadly attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, were really carried out by terrorists.”<sup>3</sup>

As if to belabor his ideological zeal, Ahmadinejad in an October 2005 speech to 4,000 students in Iran said that Israel “must be wiped off the map” and that attacks by Palestinians would destroy it. In that oratory,

Ahmadinejad elaborated that the “establishment of a Zionist regime was a move by the world oppressor against the Islamic world” and that “skirmishes in the occupied land are part of the war of destiny. The outcome of hundreds of years of war will be defined in Palestinian land.”<sup>4</sup> For those who attributed Ahmadinejad's UN performance to a slip, they were corrected in December 2005 when he argued in a speech to a conference of Islamic countries in Saudi Arabia that if Europeans established Israel out of guilt over the Nazi reign, then Israel should be carved out of Europe. If that ignorance of history were not enough, Ahmadinejad in another December 2005 speech, this time back in Iran, called the Holocaust's extermination of 6 million Jews a “myth” that never happened.<sup>5</sup>

Reasonable people in the West end up scratching their heads pondering the purpose behind Ahmadinejad's bellicose and anti-Israeli outbursts. Some astute Iranian observers such as Karim Sadjadpour and Ray Takeyh suggest that the Iranian president's behavior is aimed at provoking a crisis and scuttling international negotiations over Iran's nuclear-related activities, especially enriching uranium, as well as asserting his control over Iran's state machinery and gaining political influence among the Iranian populace.<sup>6</sup>

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All the while, a curious depiction has turned up in the Western press of Ahmadinejad's rival for the presidency, Ali Akhbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, whom many characterize as a moderate. Rafsanjani, contrary to the popular media view, has been in and around the halls of Tehran's political power more than anyone else for over 20 years, during which time Iran's clandestine nuclear activities were shielded from the International Atomic Energy Agency. He presumably has more than a fair share of vested interest in seeing that Iran eventually acquires nuclear weapons.<sup>7</sup> A nuclear-armed Iran under a Rafsanjani presidency would give Israel, and the United States for that matter, little comfort. It was Rafsanjani who in 2001 “mused that a single nuclear

weapon could obliterate Israel, whereas Israel could ‘only damage’ the world of Islam.”<sup>8</sup>

To make matters worse, the Iranian public, which the Western press is all too eager to depict as a demographic youth bulge born after the 1979 Iranian revolution and eager for liberalization and democratization, is across-the-board supportive of the drive for nuclear power. As Ramita Navai reported from Tehran, “Iran's right to nuclear energy and defiance of the West over its nuclear ambitions is the first issue since the 1979 Islamic Revolution that has galvanized all political factions, classes and public opinion.”<sup>9</sup>

With this Iranian internal political landscape, Ahmadinejad's statements fuel the fire of Israeli fears about Iran. Some dismiss Israeli fears as “overblown,” but as the old quip has it, even paranoids have real enemies—and Iran is such an enemy. The Iranians have been extraordinarily consistent and patient in their sponsorship of Hizballah, which has long waged a guerrilla war against Israel. There can be no gainsaying that Iran has been Hizballah's godfather and staunchest foreign backer and that the organization has inflicted significant casualties and costs on Israel, not to mention the United States.

The mood in Israel is that Iran is no imaginary threat. To the contrary, as Ephraim Kam, a level-headed and insightful Israeli national security analyst, observes, “Many Israeli leaders regard the Iranian threat as the gravest strategic threat facing Israel, and some regard it as liable to endanger Israel's very existence in the future.” Kam, peering ahead, adds that “Iran's possession of nuclear weapons is of major significance to Israel: a new situation would arise whereby for the first time since Israel's establishment an enemy state has the capability of fatally wounding it.”<sup>10</sup>

The Israelis, moreover, are gravely concerned that their capabilities to deter regional adversaries are fraying. Their formidable conventional military capabilities have not secured a peace with the Palestinian Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip or a peace in the Fatah-controlled West Bank. And Israeli confidence in its military forces to secure its northern border was seriously threatened by Hizballah rockets fired from Lebanon during the summer 2006 war. The Israelis worry that Hizballah is a proxy for Iran's belligerent policies and that should Iran get nuclear weapons, Tehran would have license to escalate future cross-border surrogate guerrilla operations



against Israel. Tehran would no longer fear Israeli military retaliation, which the Iranians could deter with their nuclear weapons.

The Iranians might further calculate that escalating Hizballah—as well as Hamas and Islamic Jihad—operations against Israel would play well politically in the Muslim and Arab worlds. Tehran's stance toward the Jewish state already wins political support at home and in the greater Middle East. This is true even among Iran's traditional Arab rivals such as Saudi Arabia, which, at least for now, has not vehemently protested Iran's cage-rattling performances against Israel because the Arab states are deeply frustrated by the Palestinian plight and resent Tel Aviv for its military prowess and for having acquired nuclear weapons before any Arab state.

The Israelis also have a deep insecurity due to geographic vulnerability, an aspect of their national security that should not be underestimated. Israel is only a narrow swath of territory along the sea, and its principal population and government centers are located in the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem areas. Americans need to remember their Cold War fears of the potential for only 30 minutes warning of the launching of Soviet nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles at the United States. That recollection would give Americans a mere whiff of the Israeli worry about the warning time of only minutes inside the Middle East.

Aggravating these acute security concerns is the collective memory of the Holocaust. Israeli society is rightly permeated with the determination to never again allow adversaries to threaten the existence of the Jewish community, which now is most prominently displayed in the state of Israel. The possession of nuclear weapons in the hands of Iranians, or its security policy surrogates in its guerrilla war against Israel, would present just such a concrete and existential threat. The Israelis will have to worry that someday, either by design or mishap, Iranian nuclear weapons might find their way from Iranian Revolutionary Guard arsenals into Hizballah, Hamas, or Islamic Jihad hands.

### Preemptive Military Action

The Israelis frequently warn that they will not idly stand by as Iran marches toward a nuclear weapons arsenal. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in January 2008 told government officials that "Israel clearly will not reconcile itself to a nuclear Iran" and that

"[a]ll options [preventing] Iran from gaining nuclear capabilities are legitimate within the context of how to grapple with this matter."<sup>11</sup> These words are echoes of the Begin Doctrine, initially articulated by former Prime Minister Menachem Begin, which holds that Israel will not wait and watch potentially hostile states acquire nuclear weapons and will opt for preventive military means to stop prospective threats from becoming realities.

The so-called Bush Doctrine of the United States, announced in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, shares with the Begin Doctrine a common national security philosophy. Just as the Bush Doctrine appeared to become a reality with the 2003 war against Iraq, the Begin Doctrine became a reality with

by UN weapons inspections in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War.

Tel Aviv recently demonstrated the continued centrality of the Begin Doctrine in Israeli national security strategy by mounting an airstrike in September 2007 against a suspected Syrian nuclear facility. Neither Israel nor Syria has officially acknowledged the strike, but fragmentary and unofficial reporting suggests that Israeli aircraft destroyed a North Korea-supplied nuclear reactor in Syria. Commercial satellite images taken of the suspected site at Tibnah showed that the Syrians hastily dismantled facilities after the attack in a likely attempt to hide evidence of a partially built nuclear reactor similar to the design used by North Korea.<sup>12</sup> The



Israeli sailors paint SAAR 5-class missile corvette at Haifa Naval Base, Israel

U.S. Navy (Kevin S. O'Brien)

the Israeli preventive strike on Iraq's nuclear power reactor, called Osiraq, in 1981. That bold Israeli move has come to epitomize preventive military action against an emerging nuclear threat. Unfortunately, the Israeli strike was only a tactical achievement. Afterward, the Iraqis dispersed their nuclear weapons-related activities to numerous locations to reduce their vulnerability to preemptive military strikes, moves that were uncovered

Israelis probably calculated that no official pronouncements would dampen international political tension that could have spun the limited attack into a broader regional crisis. No doubt, though, the Israelis also sought to send a veiled and credible threat to Tehran that Tel Aviv could do the same to Iran's nuclear facilities and infrastructure.

For now, Tel Aviv is engaged in a diplomatic effort to keep world attention on Iran

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and its nuclear weapons aspirations. Former Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom in December 2005 told the cabinet that “in pursuing the diplomatic course of trying to get the issue moved to the Security Council, Israel must be careful to ensure that the problem remains an international—not an Israeli—one.”<sup>13</sup> Along a similar vein in portraying the Iran crisis as an international one, then-Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Dan Halutz asserted in January 2006 that “Israel is in no rush. The whole world condemns Iran’s actions—it cannot be perceived as an exclusively Israeli problem and should not be treated as one.”<sup>14</sup> Israeli intelligence appears to judge that Iran could have a nuclear weapon by the end of 2009 at the earliest and more likely in the 2010–2011 timeframe.<sup>15</sup> Israel still has some time to play in the diplomatic arena and to nudge Washington into taking military action against Iran’s nuclear infrastructure to lift the burden from Israeli shoulders.

### Daunting Challenges

The application of the Begin Doctrine against Iran—as a replay of Israeli preventive strikes against Syrian and Iraqi nuclear capabilities—would be a profoundly more difficult operational challenge. The Iranians are no one’s fools, and they have no doubt learned from Iraq’s experience in 1981 and Syria’s experience in 2007. From what can be gleaned from public information, Iran’s nuclear infrastructure components—

from uranium mining, to enrichment, to research and development, to the Bushehr nuclear power plant—are all geographically dispersed in the large land mass that makes up Iran, making them extraordinarily difficult for Israel to strike with one large aircraft package as was done in Iraq and Syria. Iran too might have taken steps to maintain and keep hidden redundant infrastructure, especially for uranium enrichment, in light of the public disclosures, to compound the difficulty for any Israeli military campaign to decisively derail Iran’s nuclear weapons program.

For all its military prowess, Israel would face enormous difficulties in attempting to destroy a large part of Iran’s suspected nuclear weapons infrastructure. The air force must fly a long way to attack far removed Iranian targets. It would have to rely on its inventory of 25 F–15I aircraft, with a range of 4,450 kilometers, as the workhorses for an Iranian strike package.<sup>16</sup> These aircraft would have to fly through potentially hostile airspace—possibly Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq, not to mention Iran itself—which could consume fuel for evasive maneuvers and reduce the ranges of Israeli airpower projection into Iran. The aircraft also would have to carry external fuel tanks, reducing the amount of ordnance carried. To possibly make matters worse from the Israeli military standpoint, much of the airspace the Israelis would have to fly through to get to Iranian

territory—save Syria—is closely monitored and patrolled by American air and naval forces.

There is a chance that the Israelis would give the United States a heads-up on their military plans in order to reduce the chances of coming to air-to-air blows with American forces operating over Iraq and the Persian Gulf. Alternatively, the Israelis might opt not to give Washington advanced notice, fearing that the Americans would object or try to stall the action. As former Deputy National Security Advisor Chuck Freilich notes, Israel might “refrain from placing itself in a potential veto situation much as it did in 1981, when it did not consult or inform the United States prior to attacking the Iraqi reactor at Osiraq.”<sup>17</sup>

Israel’s security relations with Turkey over the years have given rise to speculation that Tel Aviv could use Turkish air bases, or airspace for air-to-air refueling, for easier and shorter access to Iranian targets. Ankara’s political refusal to allow the United States to use Turkey as a staging ground for the 2003 war against Iraq, however, shows just how little an appetite the Turks have for hosting foreign forces for operations against their southern neighbors. Ankara has polite relations with Tehran and would not want to jeopardize them, especially if Iran is on the cusp of acquiring nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the Israelis might go ahead and transit Turkish airspace for strikes against Iran without Ankara’s permission and risk a major setback to security ties with Turkey, hoping the political backlash would be fleeting.

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Even if the Israelis could overcome these substantial operational challenges and mount a large air assault on Iran’s nuclear infrastructure, they would be even more hard pressed to follow up with the sustained campaigns needed to repeatedly bomb widespread and substantially heavier infrastructure than Iraq had in 1981 or Syria in 2007. As retired Israeli Brigadier General Shlomo Brom assesses, “Based on the past performance of the IAF [Israeli air force], its order of battle that includes only F–15I and F–16C/D aircraft capable of long range strike, and the deployment of its aircraft, it is possible to determine



U.S. Navy (Kevin S. O'Brien)

Navy Secretary Donald C. Winter meets with Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak in Tel Aviv, March 2008



that at long ranges (more than 600 km), the IAF is capable of a few surgical strikes, but it is not capable of a sustained air campaign against a full array of targets.”<sup>18</sup> The Israelis mounted such a limited airstrike in 1985 against the Palestine Liberation Organization’s headquarters in Tunis, Tunisia, which required aerial refueling of F-15 aircraft and travel of more than 4,000 kilometers.<sup>19</sup> The Tunis strike, however, was a one-time event against sites specifically known and located.

The Israelis might complement aircraft operations with naval assets, but these options have limitations, too. The Israelis could employ their *Dolphin*-class submarines to launch cruise missiles at Iran from the Arabian Sea and also use special operations forces, but even these efforts would be shy of the payloads needed to level Iran’s nuclear infrastructure.

The Israelis also could tap their sophisticated inventory of ballistic missiles to target Iran’s nuclear weapons infrastructure in combination with fixed-wing aircraft operations. Public information on Israeli stores of Jericho I missiles, with an estimated payload of 450 to 650 kilograms and a range of up to 500 kilometers, and Jericho II missiles, with payloads of 750 to 1,500 kilograms and a range of more than 1,500 kilometers, is hard to come by.<sup>20</sup> The Congressional Research Service estimates a modest Israeli inventory of about 50 Jericho I and 100 Jericho II missiles.<sup>21</sup> In January 2008, Israel test fired a Jericho III missile, which caught Iran’s attention.<sup>22</sup> Tel Aviv no doubt hopes the display will help deter Tehran’s use of ballistic missiles against Israel.

The use of Jericho ballistic missiles in preventive strikes against Iran’s nuclear infrastructure would risk depleting delivery systems for Israel’s nuclear weapons deterrent. But Tel Aviv could embark on a clandestine and sizable buildup of its Jericho missile inventories to be able to saturate Iranian targets with ballistic missiles armed with conventional warheads.

### Brutal Logic of Deterrence

The Israelis might throw up their hands and conclude that any military options are simply too hard or risky and offer too limited prospects for success. Tel Aviv could ultimately and reluctantly calculate that the political costs coupled with the slim prospects for entirely eliminating Iran’s nuclear weapons infrastructure rule out unilaterally moving with military means. The easiest and default policy—one

that is not without risks but that perhaps has fewer risks and more rewards than a military showdown with Iran and political fallout with Israel’s security partners—would be to rely on deterrence. The Israelis might calculate that no matter how ideologically motivated Iran’s president and its Revolutionary Guard are, or

Tel Aviv also could use a variety of behind-the-scenes diplomatic and intelligence channels to privately, quietly, confidently, and authoritatively convey the same message to Iran’s Foreign Ministry, intelligence services, Revolutionary Guard, and regime advisors to ensure that Israeli “red lines” for Iran’s

*the problem from the Israeli standpoint is that the regime in Tehran more nearly resembles a circus-like contest for political power than a unitary decisionmaking body*

how warped their perception of reality is, there will be no escaping the brutal logic of massive nuclear retaliation.

The Iranians would have to realize that, notwithstanding the geographic vulnerability of Israel, they would never be able to achieve a strategic surprise and launch barrages of nuclear weapons loaded on ballistic missiles to decapitate Israeli leadership in order to prevent Israel from launching its own nuclear-tipped Jericho missiles to wipe out Tehran. The Israelis could impress upon the Iranians this cold-blooded logic—informed by Cold War history—via thinly veiled public pronouncements that stop short of acknowledging Israel’s nuclear weapons capabilities.

handling of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons in a crisis, as well as the dangers should Tehran be tempted to transfer nuclear weapons to a transnational group such as Hizballah, are understood by Iranian leadership. The problem from the Israeli standpoint is that the regime in Tehran more nearly resembles a circus-like contest for political power than a unitary, contemplative, deliberate decisionmaking body.

Some strategists point to Saddam Hussein’s restraint in not firing biological and chemical weapons—tipped ballistic missiles at Israel during the 1991 Gulf War as evidence that nuclear deterrence is robust. The late national security expert Ze’ev Schiff put the

<http://www.sajed.ir>



Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Supreme Leader of Islamic Republic of Iran

common Israeli lesson of the 1991 war this way: "The fact that Saddam did not use chemical weapons against Israel even when he was under great stress from attacking forces shows that he understood there are some things Israel simply could not tolerate, even if Washington was opposed to any Israeli response."<sup>23</sup> But if Saddam simply withheld the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) against Israel during the 1991 war because coalition forces were not marching on Baghdad and directly threatening his regime, then any Israeli confidence in their ability to deter a nuclear-armed Iran would be misplaced.

### The "Sadat" Military Option

Israel's military operations offer no panacea or easy solution to the Iranian nuclear threat, but that does not rule out the limited military options that the Israelis do have. Falling back onto the logic of deterrence would still leave Israelis insecure vis-à-vis an Iran moving closer and closer to a nuclear weapons stockpile. Security could be further undermined should Ahmadinejad or his successors grow in their bellicosity and recklessness as they approach their nuclear weapons goal. A more confident and aggressive Iranian foreign policy could jeopardize Tel Aviv's confidence in its ability to work out red lines and "rules of the road" for governing deterrence in a Israeli-Iranian nuclear rivalry.

In such desperate straits, the Israelis might reluctantly conclude that they need to resort to a military move—if only symbolically—to reawaken and force renewed political attention and pressure on Iran from the United States, Europe, and the world community. The Israelis, in coming to such a conclusion, might have as their model former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's masterful use of the 1973 war for seizing political leverage. In ordering the Egyptian attack on Israel, Sadat harbored no illusion of militarily defeating Israel, but he aimed at profoundly changing the international political climate to negotiate a peace treaty with Israel on honorable terms for Egypt. The Israelis might find themselves with their backs against the wall and thrash out to destroy a piece of Iran's nuclear infrastructure and then settle back into a defensive crouch to watch international reactions and to guard against Iranian retaliation.

This is not a fanciful scenario if one remembers the great uncertainty about the prospects of preventively attacking Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981. Israeli military plan-

ners were far from confident that the strike would be worth the risks, but they undertook the mission even though they lacked a clear picture of its impact, according to a leaked air force research paper.<sup>24</sup> In the final analysis, Tel Aviv calculated that it needed to take the risks associated with its poor information picture of Iraq's program, given the grave threat emerging in Baghdad. If Tel Aviv was willing to run these military risks and uncertainties then, it could do it again against Iran, even if the mission is more demanding and risky.

The Israelis might calculate that the threats posed by Iranian retaliation would be manageable; they sustained numerous Iraqi ballistic missile strikes during the 1991 Gulf War and could bet on riding out some Iranian retaliatory strikes with their Shahab ballistic missiles armed with conventional warheads. They might also calculate that they could weather the international political opprobrium for attacking Iran. Israel has long been accustomed to suffering the slings and arrows of political and diplomatic blowback from controversial decisions such as the 1981 attack on Iraq, the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, the 2006 war in Lebanon, and daily regional criticisms that Tel Aviv, and not current and past failures of Palestinian leadership, is responsible for the tragic plight of the Palestinian people.

### Bleak Diplomatic Prospects

Israeli diplomacy will press the Americans as well as the Europeans with all its strength for a diplomatic settlement to the Iranian crisis. The diplomatic threat and imposition of more international sanctions on Iran would be all well and good, but the Tehran regime probably would not feel the full bite of economic sanctions for a long time. The international community has already economically and politically isolated Tehran, and more of the same would have only marginal impact. In the short term, the regime would wear economic and political sanctions as badges of honor for standing in defiance of the international community, enhancing Iran's self-image and shoring up political support for Ahmadinejad's regime with Iranian nationalism. The economic sanction that would hurt Iran the most would be an economic embargo on the purchase of Iranian oil, but the economic and political blowback on the Europeans and Americans in a high petroleum demand environment would likely be too bitter a pill to swallow.

By the same token, the Israelis are well aware of the dangers of Iran using diplomacy to play for time as their clandestine work toward nuclear weapons proceeds. The Iranians, for their part, know well that the cocktail of public denials, avoidance of incontrovertible or "smoking gun" evidence of nuclear weapons aspirations, and diplomacy that plays along with the International Atomic Energy Agency all allowed North Korea to cross the nuclear weapons threshold. Tehran today is likely following in Pyongyang's footsteps. The Israelis will probably come to the conclusion, if they have not already, that a credible threat of American force is needed to backstop European-American diplomatic efforts and to prevent Tehran from going the North Korean route. The threat of American force is needed to put Tehran into a fix in which it cannot indefinitely stall while working to expand its uranium enrichment capabilities and its stocks of enriched uranium.

Some observers caution against an American or Israeli military option against Iran and point to the Libyan surrender of its WMD and ballistic programs as a case that shows economic sanctions can bring dramatic changes in regime calculus over the costs and benefits of having these programs. To be sure, the international political and economic isolation of Muammar Qadhafi's regime was a critical pressure that changed his calculus. But the straw that broke the camel's back probably was Qadhafi's fear in 2003 that after Iraq, the United States would be prepared to wield military force against Tripoli for its nuclear weapons program, which was internationally exposed by the interception of the BBC *China* cargo ship. The combination of political and economic isolation took a decade to hurt the Libyan regime, and the specter of military force against Tripoli tipped the balance toward a surrender of its WMD and ballistic missiles.

One way for the Israelis to slip out of their "rock and a hard place" predicament is to press the United States to shoulder the burden. Tel Aviv might even threaten exercising a "Sadat option" to induce the Americans to move militarily against Iran in lieu of Israeli military action. Washington would have to worry that an Israeli attack against Iran would risk a public opinion backlash in the Muslim world, including Arab capitals, which would threaten to reignite the Israel-Arab conflict and further reduce the already bleak prospects for an Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The Israelis could become frustrated with Tehran's diplomatic obfuscation and U.S. and European diplomatic passivity and unwillingness to threaten force. Thus, the Israelis could strike out militarily with no illusion of severely damaging Iran's nuclear infrastructure, but with every intention of shocking the international community via the Sadat option into substantially greater diplomatic, political, economic, and military pressure on Iran.

An Israeli military strike against Iran could also be precipitated by more bellicose threats and reckless actions from Ahmadinejad's regime. Tehran, for example, could encourage and operationally support fresh waves of Hizballah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad attacks against Israeli interests. In Israeli eyes, escalated Iranian-sponsored attacks would "prove" that Iran is hostile and that its leadership lacks prudent restraint. They would also demonstrate the "undeterrable" nature of the Tehran regime. Such attacks might be reminiscent of, or even more spectacular than, Iran's sponsorship—according to former Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Louis Freeh—of the Saudi Hizballah attack against the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996 that killed 19 American Servicemen or the Iran-Hizballah bombings in the 1990s against the Israeli embassy and a Jewish community center in Argentina, which together killed 110 people.<sup>25</sup>

Whether or not the Israelis confer in advance with the Americans about military operations against Iran, Washington should be prepared for retaliation. The Iranians, along with much of the Muslim world, are going to believe that the Americans encouraged and approved the mission. Ahmadinejad blustered in January 2008 that that "Zionist regime . . . would not dare attack Iran. . . . It knows that any attack on Iranian territories would prompt a fierce response."<sup>26</sup> The deputy commander of Iran's air force warned in September 2007 that "[we] have drawn up a plan to strike back at Israel with our bombers."<sup>27</sup> Iran's air force, however, is in a sorry state, given poor maintenance and aging aircraft, and would be little match against Israeli aircraft in air-to-air combat.

Iran's more effective means of retaliation against Israel, as well as against the United States, would include a range of military and Revolutionary Guard operations, from ballistic missile firings against Israel and American Gulf state security partners; naval mining;

special operations against Gulf shipping; more aggressive military, financial, and logistic support for Hizballah; and Iranian intelligence bombing operations against worldwide Israeli and American diplomatic and military positions. Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, warned in April 2006 that if "the U.S. ventured into any aggression on Iran, Iran will retaliate by damaging U.S. interests worldwide twice as much as the U.S. may inflict on Iran."<sup>28</sup> The Iranians too could take American Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and diplomats hostage, much as they did with 15 British sailors and marines in March 2007. Iran also could aid and abet al Qaeda operations against the United States. In short, the Israeli "Sadat" scenario is one for which American policymakers and military commanders need to plan in order to be ready for Iranian retaliatory measures, especially in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility. **JFQ**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Steven Erlanger, "Israelis Brief Top U.S. Official on Iran," *The New York Times*, December 11, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> This observation is based on conversations the author had with a number of Israeli security officials during a January 2006 visit to Israel.

<sup>3</sup> Dafna Linzer, "Iran's President Does What U.S. Diplomacy Could Not," *The Washington Post*, September 19, 2005, A12.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Nazila Fathi, "Iran's New President Says Israel 'Must Be Wiped Off the Map,'" *The New York Times*, October 27, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Vick, "Iran's President Calls Holocaust 'Myth' in Latest Assault on Jews," *The Washington Post*, December 15, 2005, A1.

<sup>6</sup> Karim Sadjadpour and Ray Takeyh, "Behind Iran's Hard-Line on Israel," *Boston Globe*, December 23, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> On this point, see George Perkovich, *Dealing with Iran's Nuclear Challenge*, Policy Outlook (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 28, 2003), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in "Misreading Iran: It Wants More Than Reassurance," *The Economist*, January 14, 2006, 16.

<sup>9</sup> Ramita Navai, "A Divided Nation Puts Differences Aside on the Nuclear Road," *London Times*, August 11, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Ephraim Kam, "Curbing the Iranian Nuclear Threat: The Military Option," *Strategic Assessment* 7, no. 3 (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, December 2004), 3.

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<sup>13</sup> Herb Keinon, "Shalom: Iran's Nuclear Confidence Grows as the World Fiddles," *Jerusalem Post*, January 9, 2006, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Margot Dudkevitch, "Halutz: Iran's Going Nuclear Not Just Israel's Problem," *Jerusalem Post*, January 10, 2006, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Erlanger.

<sup>16</sup> "Is Nuclear Parity with Iran a Blessing in Disguise for Israel?" *Jane's Intelligence Review*, December 8, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Chuck Freilich, *Speaking about the Unspeakable: U.S.-Israeli Dialogue on Iran's Nuclear Program*, Policy Focus 77 (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 2007), 11.

<sup>18</sup> Shlomo Brom, "Is the Begin Doctrine Still a Viable Option for Israel?" in *Getting Ready for a Nuclear-Ready Iran*, ed. Henry Sokolski and Patrick Clawson (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, Army War College, 2005), 142–143.

<sup>19</sup> Whitney Raas and Austin Long, "Osirak Redux? Assessing Israeli Capabilities to Destroy Iranian Nuclear Facilities," *International Security* 31, no. 4 (Spring 2007), 20.

<sup>20</sup> Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control, "Israel Missile Update," *The Risk Report* 11, no. 6 (November–December 2005), available at <www.wisconsinproject.org/countries/israel/IsraelMissile2005.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Feickert, *Missile Survey: Ballistic Missiles and Cruise Missiles of Selected Countries* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, July 26, 2005), 36.

<sup>22</sup> "Israel Tests New Long-Range Missile," *USA Today*, January 17, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Zeev Schiff, "Israel after the War," *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 2 (Spring 1991), 32.

<sup>24</sup> Arie O'Sullivan, "IAF: Osirak Attack Shows Partial Feasibility Enough for Iran Strike," *Jerusalem Post*, January 12, 2006, 7.

<sup>25</sup> For background, see Louis J. Freeh, "Remember Khobar Towers," *Wall Street Journal*, May 20, 2003. By the former FBI director's account of the Khobar attack, "the entire operation was planned, funded and coordinated by Iran's security services . . . acting on orders from the highest levels of the regime in Tehran."

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<sup>27</sup> Nazila Fathi, "General Says Iran Can Strike Back at Israel," *The New York Times*, September 19, 2007.

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