

SPECIAL ANALYSIS: Israel-Iran Short-Term Potential for Conflict**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Despite comments by some Israeli leaders, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, that the window for attacking Iran's nuclear program is closing, it is **unlikely** that Israel will conduct a unilateral attack in the short-term. Any attack would strain Israeli military capabilities to the limit, invite costly counterstrikes from Iran and/or its proxies, worsen global economic conditions (impair oil transshipments, Middle East instability, etc.), and severely damage the Israeli economy which, to-date, has been a success story for

Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Political Considerations

- Prime Minister Netanyahu's comments indicating that Israel will take unilateral action and not rely on allies is assessed as an effort to force President Obama's hand in supporting future Israeli action or, optimally, pressuring the U.S. to take the lead in military action against Iranian nuclear facilities
 - Based on the perception that President Obama is vulnerable during the pre-election period on support-to-Israel issues with some voters
- Much of the Israeli government (including President Shimon Peres), leaders of the Israeli Defense Forces, and the Israeli public are not in support of an attack (61% oppose without U.S. support)¹
- U.S. support, or acquiescence, does not seem to be in place as evidenced by recent trips to Israel by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, both of whom urged restraint to allow more time for sanctions to take effect and diplomatic resolution

Military Considerations

- Israelis are masters at operational security; they have had numerous surprise attacks that aided their strategic position [Six-Day War (1967)]; spoiled threats [attacks on Osirak (1981)] and the Syrian nuclear program (2007); and saved Israeli lives [Raid on Entebbe (1976)]
- Israeli Air Force F-15s and F-16s cannot reach all the Iranian nuclear sites without aerial refueling; would have to do over the Mediterranean Sea or Arabian Gulf (hard to do covertly)
 - Need to hit three to eight sites in Iran simultaneously; probably cannot aerial refuel large enough strike package to do so
 - The Iranians have a proficient, if not completely modern, point defense anti-aircraft capability

- Israel may not be able to withstand counterstrike without U.S. Navy or Air Force elements hitting Iranian airfields and missile sites to attenuate retaliatory strikes
 - Estimates of 90-100,000 short and medium range missiles and rockets capable of striking Israeli cities just from Iranian proxy groups (Hezbollah, Hamas, etc.)ⁱⁱ

Economic Considerations

- Iran threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz if attackedⁱⁱⁱ; 20% of the world oil supply transits daily^{iv}
 - While Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have taken steps to mitigate, through use of pipelines, even a brief closure of the strait may cause skyrocketing of fuel prices in the West
- One estimate indicates that the Israeli economy would suffer \$42 billion in damages, equivalent to 5.4% of Israel's GDP, and sustain \$6 billion in damage to business for three to five years after an attack^v

Domestic Considerations

- While supporters and former members of Iranian proxy groups reside in the United States, it is highly unlikely that they would engage in violent action locally if the U.S. did not participate in an attack on Iran
- In the event that the U.S. did participate, it is possible that terrorist acts could occur in U.S. urban centers as retaliation although this may seem counter-productive for the Iranian regime in the long run

ISSUE:

There is renewed speculation on the timing of a potential Israeli military strike targeting Iranian nuclear facilities which the Israelis hope would terminate or significantly delay Iran's alleged development of nuclear weapons. This comes as pressure to preemptively strike continues to grow from some portions, but not all, of the Israeli government. The White House is encouraging restraint in an effort to allow more time for the significant economic sanctions imposed by the U.S., European Union, and to a lesser extent, the United Nations, to take effect. However, the Israeli government has been vocal about their interpretation that while the sanctions are having an impact on the Iranian economy, they have been ineffective in stopping Iran's progress in obtaining a nuclear weapon.

The Israeli argument for military action is that it is better than allowing an Iranian nuclear state to exist in the region. Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barack fears Iran is nearing a "zone of immunity"^{vi} after which it will be impossible to terminate the Iranian nuclear weapons program by military strike or any other means. The arguments against military action range from the impossibility of successfully attacking the dispersed Iranian program to the specter of massive Iranian retaliation or regional war and worldwide economic crisis.

Based on factors presented, while Israel apparently possesses the potential intent and military capability to attack the Iranian program through military strike, it is **unlikely to do so in the short-term** (prior to 2013).

RELEVANT FACTORS:

1. SANCTIONS

While the Iranian progress on obtaining a nuclear weapon has been, apparently, halting, a report issued by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in November 2011^{vii} stated that a "credible" case existed that "Iran has carried out activities relevant to the development of a nuclear device" and that further activities may still be ongoing. The United Nations inspector's stark judgment coincided with firmer economic actions by the United States and the European Union. President Obama's administration announced in February that sanctions would freeze all property of the Central Bank of Iran, other Iranian financial institutions, and the Iranian government in the United States. At the same time, the European Union agreed not to sign new oil contracts with Iran and to end existing ones by July 1. Iran retaliated shortly thereafter by banning oil exports to Britain and France.

There is still hope in the U.S. and Europe that sanctions imposed on Iran by the international community will coerce Iran into complying with the IAEA's demands to cease its uranium enrichment and cooperate with future inspections protocols. The actual economic effects of the basket of sanctions vary from devastating (shortage of dollars, Iranian currency devaluing by 40%, problems importing food) to mild due to exemptions in the U.S. scheme (other countries can still trade without consequence if trade volumes decrease) and efforts by China, Japan, and India to continue trade with Iran by circumventing banking restrictions.

2. TIMING

Israel believes that it has a limited window of time in which they can strike Iran unilaterally. Israel Defense Minister Ehud Barak expressed concern about a pending “zone of immunity,” suggesting that the Iranians are nearing the point when military action is no longer an option.

In terms of timing, Israel has to consider the implications of Iran’s counteractions. Iran’s proxies near Israel, Hezbollah in Lebanon and, possibly, Hamas in the Gaza Strip, may retaliate with short and medium range rockets of which they have thousands. Iran can retaliate directly with its own ground-to-ground missile arsenal such as the Shahab-3 with a 2,200 lbs. warhead and a circular error probability within 160 feet^{viii}. Iran has threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz which would probably be only minimally effective due to western naval and air assets in the region. Attacks on western interests in the region and in Europe and the U.S. by Iranian operatives cannot be discounted especially in light of the apparent Iranian attacks on Israel in India, Thailand, Georgia and Bulgaria earlier this year. The likelihood of strong Iranian backlash would suggest that Israel would seek prior coordination with the U.S. and sympathetic western powers to act as a counterbalance to the presumed Iranian backlash. That coordination does not seem to be in place based on Secretary Clinton’s comments suggesting solidarity but restraint by Israel and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Martin Dempsey’s comments that, “they (Israel) could delay but not destroy Iran’s nuclear capabilities,” and “we admit that our clocks are ticking at different paces.”^{ix}

3. ELECTION YEAR

Given that it is an election year in the United States, there is some speculation that Israeli authorities may attempt to force President Barack Obama’s hand in supporting military action or stronger non-military actions. One stream of discussion holds that President Obama will react favorably to Israel’s call for muscular action due to a desire not to look soft in support to Israel to voters in his base. Challenger Mitt Romney has made a recent visit to Israel and supports Israel’s claims regarding Jerusalem. A contrary argument holds that U.S. military action pre-election may engender a “rally around the flag” reaction within the U.S. helping secure President Obama’s re-election which may be undesirable to Tel Aviv. President Obama has kept a notably “arms length” relationship with the Israeli leadership who may favor a new occupant in the Oval Office. The debate about the role of the U.S. elections in November is equivocal at best.

4. MILITARY OPERATION AGAINST IRAN

If the political and strategic considerations of an Israeli attack on Iran are very complex, so are the operational and tactical realities faced in organizing a successful attack on the dispersed elements of the Iranian nuclear program. While the Israeli Air Force has achieved great success in the past with surprise attacks, the scope of the Iranian program, Iranian anti-air capabilities and geography make a similar attack much more problematic. Without support from the United States, Iranian counteractions in the short and long-term may make an attack untenable. Evidence of Israel’s intentions to commit to an attack on the Iranian nuclear program may be reviewing Israel’s history of use of surprise military action, tactical and operational realities, and Israel’s stated intent and preparedness for such an undertaking.

A. HISTORY OF THE ISRAELI SURPRISE ATTACK

Israel has used surprise attack on numerous occasions to improve its strategic position, spoil potential threats, and defend Israeli citizens. These attacks were generally preceded by detailed planning (sometimes performed quickly), coupled with excellent operational security:

i. Operation Focus^x

Date: June 5, 1967

Goal: Destroy the Egyptian Air Force on the ground to spoil pending United Arab attacks on Israel

Israeli Forces: 188 tactical aircraft

Effect: 338 Egyptian aircraft destroyed on the ground including most of the bomber fleet

Israeli losses: 19 aircraft

Outcome: The United Arab armies were forced to cede air superiority during the Six-Day War; Israel's strategic position improves in the Sinai Peninsula, West Bank and on the Golan Heights

ii. Operation Entebbe (Thunderbolt)^{xi}

Date: July 4, 1976

Goal: Retrieve Israeli and Jewish passengers hijacked and flown to Entebbe Airport Uganda by terrorists from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the German Revolutionary Cells

Israeli Forces: Army: 100 (ground control element and commandos); Air Force: 4 C-130s (transport), 2 707 (mission support)

Effect: all 7 hijackers killed, 11 Ugandan Mig-17 aircraft destroyed on the ground

Israeli losses: Army: 1 killed, 5 wounded Passengers: 4 killed, 10 wounded

Outcome: 102 hostages recovered safely in 53 minute operation; western world hailed Israel for action

iii. Operation Opera^{xii}

Date: June 7, 1981

Goal: Destruction of an alleged Iraqi nuclear weapons program at the Osirak nuclear facility 11 miles southeast of Baghdad

Israeli Forces: Air Force: 8 F-16As (attack) with unguided Mark-84 2,000 lbs. bombs; 6 F-15As (air superiority)

Effect: Complete destruction of the facility; 10 Iraqi soldiers killed

Israeli losses: None

Outcome: Debate as to whether it destroyed the Iraqi nuclear weapons program or hastened Saddam Hussain's efforts in building a nuclear weapons program; no nuclear weapons program was realized

iv. Operation Wooden Leg^{xiii}

Date: October 1, 1985

Goal: Retaliatory strike against the Palestinian Liberation Organization's "Force-17" which had killed 3 Israelis aboard their yacht and fired rockets into settlements in northern Israel from Lebanon; Force-17s headquarters were in Tunis, Tunisia, 1,280 miles from Israel

Israeli Forces: 10 F-15Bs (fighter-attack) with precision guided munitions, 1 KC-707 (aerial refueling)

Effect: Complete destruction of Force-17s headquarters; 60+ Force-17 members killed, 70 injured

Israeli losses: None

Outcome: UN Resolution 573 (1985) the United Nations Security Council voted (with the United States abstaining) to condemn the attack as a flagrant violation of its Charter; considered that Tunisia had the right to appropriate reparations. Operation Wooden Leg regarded as having little effect on terrorism and was used as justification for a number of attacks, including the seizure of the Achille Lauro cruise ship on October 7 and the Abu Nidal attacks on airports in Rome and Vienna in December 1985.

v. Operation Orchard^{xiv}

Date: September 6, 2007

Goal: Destruction of a nearly completed Syrian nuclear facility

Israeli Forces: Army: 1 special forces team (probable); Air Force: 10 F-15Is (air superiority/attack), F-16Is (air superiority), electronic intelligence/warfare support aircraft

Effect: Facility totally destroyed; also destroyed a Syrian radar facility

Israeli losses: None

Outcome: The action was initially shrouded in secrecy by both sides. Apparent end to Syrian nuclear program; protest of Israeli action by Secretary General of the United Nations Ban Ki-Moon who called the action a "breach of airspace of the Syrian Arab Republic"; worldwide reaction very muted.

B. MILITARY TACTICAL/OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

The lack of a common border, or supporting regional ally, means that the Israeli Air Force (IAF) will have to covertly overfly neutral or hostile countries which may include Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, and/or

Saudi Arabia. The great ranges involved bring up additional issues of aerial refueling and aircrew rescue and recovery. The Iranian acquisition of an advanced anti-aircraft point defense system means that Israel will have to devote significant resources to ensure suppression of enemy air defense systems (SEADS) is effective for the safety of their aircrews and aircraft. While the IAF has approximately 125 F-15I and F-16I strike aircraft and 300 more tactical aircraft^{xv}, the distances involved necessitate the availability of aerial tanker support which may also have to provision electronic warfare and other support aircraft. The IAF is probably restricted to 5-8 KC-707 refuelers which would probably operate over unrestricted airspace, such as the Mediterranean Sea or Indian Ocean to conduct re-fueling operations. The actual strike package may be limited to as few as 50 aircraft. An alternative to piloted aircraft may be reliance on the IAF's unmanned aerial platforms, including the Heron TP "Eitan" UAV, though it is unclear whether these aircraft can carry sufficient payloads to destroy sizable, defended targets.

Unlike the Iraqi nuclear program in 1981, the Iranian nuclear program is already well dispersed throughout the Iran. A minimum of three locations are likely targets and each would have to be addressed simultaneously to ensure maximum impact on Iran's nuclear weapons program. At least three critical facilities underpin the Iranian program: a uranium conversion facility in Isfahan, a large uranium enrichment site at Natanz, and a heavy water production facility at Arak. A fourth facility, Fordo near Qom, appears to be gaining in significance as it is underground in a mountainous part of the country and may also have to be attacked. Additional facilities and plants at Bushehr, Darkhovin, Karaj, Amarak and Laskkar Abad^{xvi} may represent additional legs of a covert nuclear weapons program and may allow quick post-attack reconstitution of the Iranian nuclear weapons program if not also attacked. Complicating the targeting is the fact that a substantial part of the Natanz facility, which houses thousands of centrifuges, is built seventy-five feet underground under a series of concrete roofs. It is unclear if other nuclear facilities have significant hardened sites or whether other covert elements of the program exist.

Another serious challenge for a coordinated surprise attack is overcoming the threats to the IAF attack package in the form of Iranian air defense. The air defense system is comprised of fighter aircraft, surface-to-air missiles and anti-aircraft artillery (AAA). The Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force (IRIAF) is comprised of a mix of third and fourth generation U.S., Russian and Chinese tactical aircraft. Prior to the 1979 Islamic revolution, the U.S. supplied 472 tactical aircraft to the Imperial Iranian Air Force including F-14s, F-4D/Es, RF-4Es, and F-5E/Fs. Post-revolution, the IRIAF added aircraft from China (F-7Ms---from the MiG-21 design), and Russia (MiG-29 Fulcrums and Su-24MK Fencer-Ds). In 1991, fleeing Iraqi Air Force pilots further bolstered the IRIAF fleet with the addition of Mirage F1BQ/EQs, Su-24MKs, MiG-29s, Su-20s, Su-22M Fitters, Su-25 Frogfoots, and MiG-23s, many of which were absorbed into IRIAF squadrons or used to create new units. While a large number of the older U.S. and Iraqi acquired aircraft may no longer be operational due to age and/or lack of spare parts, up to 200-250 tactical IRIAF aircraft may be operational and capable of defending Iranian air space.

Iranian air-defense missile systems likewise reflect acquisitions from the West and East as well as homegrown variants. From the modern Tor-M1 (SA-15 "Gauntlet") Russian-supplied missile system to older Hawk missile batteries (US) and Rapier towed systems (UK), the IRIAF and Iranian army have numerous air defense types but apparently lack an integrated air defense network. The likely

deployment of these missile systems is as point defense systems which may not prevent air intrusion into Iran, but may dissuade attacks on defended locations. The Iranian AAA is based on post-World War 2 and Cold War-era Soviet designed towed and self-propelled guns and includes a more modern Iranian-developed close-in weapon system known as the Mesbah 1. Lacking an integrated air defense system, the operational coordination between IRIAF tactical aircraft, air-defense missile systems and AAA is unclear. The air defense system overall is porous but may be locally formidable.

IRANIAN PROXY GROUPS:

1. HEZBOLLAH

Iran and its terrorist proxy, Hezbollah, have force projection capabilities in overseas locations where they can direct some level of terrorist attacks. As a result, there is potential for Iranian or Hezbollah acts against Western interests abroad. At the same time, there is the potential for more domestic terrorism. There have already been a number of Iranian attacks against Israelis abroad.

Last month, a suicide bomber, speculated to be affiliated with Hezbollah, killed seven Israeli tourists on a bus in Bulgaria. The Bulgaria attack occurred on the 18th anniversary of a bombing at the Argentine Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires which killed 85 people. Netanyahu accused Iran and Hezbollah of the India bombing this February, targeting the wife of Israel's defense attaché in Delhi.^{xvii} The attack occurred the same day as an attempted bombing targeting an Israeli embassy car in Georgia. The next day, another failed attack by Iranian nationals occurred in Bangkok. Speculation as to the responsible parties suggests that these attacks are the work of, or supported by, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) "Qods" or Jerusalem force.

2. HAMAS

Hamas allegedly received tens of millions of dollars worth of support in financing and weaponry from Iran, much of it channeled through Syria. That relationship seems to have broken down in the past year as Iran has reportedly broken or reduced the financial support due to discontent over Hamas' failure to support Syrian President Bashir al-Assad during the revolution by the mostly Sunni rebels. Hamas is a Sunni dominated organization. While Hamas has been known to attack Israel with rockets fired from the Gaza Strip, which it controls, the threat of Hamas retaliation on behalf of Iran may be greatly diminished now due to the strained relationship. A senior leader of Hamas in Gaza, Mahmoud Zahhar, denied the group would get involved and told the BBC: "We are not part of any political axis. . . . If Israel attacks us we will respond. If they don't, we will not get involved in any other regional conflict," he added.^{xviii}

3. OTHER VECTORS

As discussed, the IRGC's Qods Force serves as a force projection entity and is suspected of the recent worldwide attacks on Israel interests. While it may be difficult for Qods Force members to penetrate Israel to conduct attacks, their freedom of movement may be greater in Europe or even the western hemisphere. They are known to provide support to Hezbollah and they are believed to have a presence in Iranian diplomatic facilities worldwide. They are active in the Arab Gulf states.

There is apparently some discontent and criticism of this unit within Tehran as their recent terror tactics have generally met with failure prior to the Bulgaria bus bombing.

The Alavi Foundation is a Shia proselytizing and Iranian cultural group with a presence in the U.S. There is speculation that they are tied to an official arm of the Iranian government and the FBI and federal prosecutors filed a civil claim on Nov. 12, 2011 seeking forfeiture of Alavi's \$650 million in assets, among which are a Manhattan skyscraper and various properties in the states of Maryland, Texas, Virginia, and California. The Alavi Foundation has been associated with Bank Melli, listed in 2009 as a terrorist organization, and together they apparently served as a procurement front for Iran's nuclear weapons program. ^{xix} The U.S. Treasury Department believes that Bank Melli distributed \$100 million dollars to Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad through the Qods Force between 2002-2006. ^{xx}

It is unknown if the Alavi Foundation supports a tactical arm capable of carrying out retaliatory measures against the U.S. if a conflict developed between the U.S. and Iran.

ANALYSIS:

If negotiations fail in the coming months, there is the potential for direct Israel-Iran conflict which may have a devastating impact on international security and the global economy. There very well could be a rapid escalation of violence and cascading military action among a number of nations. This indicates an increased risk for Western interests, especially in the Middle East. Iran may retaliate in the region against American troops and allies, military installations, ports and embassies, or civilian populations in the region.

At this time, there is no indication that immediate military action will be used by Israel in the short-term. Until the full extent of the international sanctions can be evaluated, the United States will most likely delay support for military action. At the same time, it is our assessment that Israel could act unilaterally if its window of opportunity is diminishing to the point of no return but will likely not do so without some measure of support from the U.S.

1. INDICATORS OF PENDING ACTION:

Traditional indicators of a country preparing for military action can include increased tempo of military operations, calling-up of reserve forces, preparation of civilian populations, and actions of national leaders. Overall, review of these factors over recent weeks and months reveals mixed signals inside of Israel. Reports from The Times of Israel in April ^{xxi} conclude that the IAF has been preparing for an attack on the Iran's nuclear program for an extended period down to the detail of moving aircrew families away from bases to keep them safe from Iranian retaliatory strikes. The IDF recently installed a second Iron Dome air defense system near Eilat, near the Red Sea, which may be useful for defending the IAF base at Eilat from short-medium missile and artillery attack. (The attack on the Iraqi nuclear facility at Osirak was launched from Eilat). Six army reserve battalions were called up in May, ostensibly to defend against new threats on the Syrian and Egyptian borders. The Knesset has given the IDF authority to call up 16 additional reserve battalions if needed. Civil preparedness is also on the rise as gas masks are being distributed in Israeli commercial centers, a new system is in

place using text messages to warn of missile attacks, and northern Israel schools will hold bomb shelter drills later this month when schools open. While these factors indicate that short-term military action may be approaching, the actions of Israel's leaders are more equivocal.

2. OPERATIONAL SECURITY CONDITIONS:

A hallmark of past Israeli military success is quiet preparation and a lack of saber rattling by the Israel government followed by a devastating attack that puts Israel at a strategic and operational advantage. Recent reports and alleged leaks indicate detailed planning and increasing concern from the Prime Minister and Defense Minister. Prime Minister Netanyahu allegedly told UD Secretary of Defense Panetta on August 1 that time "is running out."^{xxii} The out-going Home Front Defense Minister, Matan Vilnai, indicated that his agency has planned for the Iranian counterstrike in some detail and has discussed the likelihood that the "war would last 30 days on several fronts."^{xxiii} The Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Michael Oren suggested in a CNN interview that Israel's timeline is different than the U.S.' and that the optimal period for military action is "small and the window is getting smaller."^{xxiv} Other leading Israeli voices counter, "It is clear that we cannot do it [destroy Iran's nuclear project] alone," (President Shimon Peres)^{xxv}; seek US leadership to address the threat, "Israel and other countries troubled by the Iranian nuclear menace must help the US revamp its strategy vis a vis Iran through shared intelligence as well as other means," (Avi Dichter, Internal Security Minister)^{xxvi}; and fear large scale retribution, "In Israel, no place is safe . . . Israel's main assets can be taken out," (Uzi Rubin, founder of Israel's Missile Defense Organization)^{xxvii}. Maj. Gen. Aharon Zeevi Farkash, former chief of military intelligence, still exerts some influence and stated to NBC, ". . . it is my opinion to try not to do this alone . . . I think Western leaders realize a nuclear Iran is the number one challenge facing the world Therefore with this coalition I can see results. I strongly believe we have the time, maybe eight or nine months."^{xxviii} Under any prior circumstance, this very vocal and discordant public debate would be unusual in the period before a strike.

3. SUMMARY:

While Israel may be trying to ramp up pressure on the U.S. and western allies to act more definitively in the face of the Iranian intransigence, it is unlikely those attempts will take the form of surprise military action in the short-term. The U.S. statements and actions to-date have been supportive but equivocal. No other nation is calling for military action and the attitude of elements of the Israeli government, the IDF, and bulk of the Israeli population seem to favor continued diplomacy coupled with escalating sanctions. Surprise attack, though a successful tactic in the past, may not yield favorable results under the current circumstances due to the distance between the countries, the large number of potential targets, the formidable Iranian point defense anti-aircraft capability, and the increasing "hardness" of the nuclear facilities. A combination of increased internal and external support for military action by Israel and credible intelligence that Iranian nuclear weapons production capability nears culmination, may tip the scales in favor of some form of military action. The military action may be unilateral with a goal of, at a minimum, buying time before Iran can field a nuclear weapon. Those factors are not likely to exist prior to 2013.

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