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The Public Discussion of Israel's Strategy regarding a Nuclear Iran

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Comments by former Mossad head Maj. Gen. (ret.) Meir Dagan decrying an Israeli military action against Iran, and reports that the Prime Minister and Defense Minister have already decided to attack Iranian nuclear facilities, have prompted criticism of senior officials who express their opinion on the subject. The “discourse” that has emerged in the wake of the reports has been described as irresponsible and as harming state security, and few have disagreed with this assessment. Subsequently a counter-campaign ensued, with background briefings, leaks to the media, and interviews about the possibility of an Israeli attack on Iran. The latest contribution was from Defense Minister Ehud Barak, who noted that the decision on an attack would not be made in the near future. He added that a major consideration must be how close Iran is to the “immunity zone,” in which it will no longer be possible to act effectively against the Iranian nuclear program.

The common assumption is that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons will prompt a dramatic strategic change with far reaching consequences, globally and regionally, overall and for Israel in particular, and will worsen Israel's strategic situation. Given the very real possibility that the international community will fail in its efforts – foremost among them economic sanctions – to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear capability, it follows that Israel is considering a military action intended to foil the threat.

Whatever the differences of opinion concerning the severity of the threat, the government of Israel will be called upon to make a series of decisions with extended consequences for a wide range of issues. It is therefore important to hold a serious public discussion intended, ultimately, to prompt the political echelon to undertake an orderly process of decision making that in addition to the operational military aspects takes other aspects into account.

Two arguments leading the opposition to a public discussion of potential military action are that the discussion of feasibility and details of the operation will reveal secrets and harm state security, and that the very fact of a public debate is liable to lead Iran to

conclude that Israel does not have a military option to thwart the nuclear threat. These arguments are problematic. First, the censor's office is charged with preventing publication of secrets that may harm state security, and thus far the discussion has not yet disclosed any such details. Second, a public discussion of this sort, if it is not one-sided, actually raises the level of worry in Iran, since it shows that the option of attack is very much on Israel's agenda. Indeed, in response to the current discussion, Iranian spokesmen have threatened a counter response. In addition, holding an open public discussion is an indication of the strength of Israeli society, rather than weakness.

A public discussion ought not to deal with the operational issues connected to a military action, lest operational plans, Iranian vulnerabilities, and limitations of Israeli capabilities are exposed. In addition, the public does not have the necessary information for a discussion of this sort, such as detailed intelligence on the Iranian nuclear program and information on the IDF's operational capabilities that are relevant to such an action. Rather, other issues are appropriate for the public debate.

The first topic that should be addressed in a public debate is a characterization of the threat. Many in the political echelon and in professional circles believe that an Iran with military nuclear capability constitutes an existential threat to Israel. A state facing an existential threat would do everything in its power to remove the threat; a military action is therefore a necessary consequence of this definition. However, is a nuclear Iran really an existential threat? Is stable mutual deterrence between Iran and Israel not possible? How these questions are answered dictates different courses of action.

The assumption is that a nuclear Iran would undermine the balance of deterrence between Israel and Iran's allies in the region, namely, Hizbollah and Hamas, and thereby aggravate the threat. Is this true? There is reason to assume that in a situation of mutual nuclear deterrence, the degree of "utility" of nuclear capability for regular military and diplomatic purposes, beyond deterrence of existential threats, is not great. If an IDF soldier were kidnapped, would the IDF refrain from a response against Hizbollah/Hamas for fear that an Israeli response would lead to an Iranian nuclear response? A nuclear Iran would indeed symbolize the end of an era in which the reigning image of Israel was as having a monopoly on deterrent capabilities. Nevertheless, beyond the image of strength that deterrence provides Israel, it does not – aside from being "an insurance policy against existential threats," an important fact in and of itself – impose Israel's agenda on its neighbors or prevent them from posing less than existential threats.

Second, how would Iranian nuclearization impact on nuclear weapons proliferation elsewhere in the Middle East? How significant a possibility is this, and what are the

implications, for Israel's security and for the stability of nuclear deterrence, of a Middle East with many nuclear states?

Third, would a nuclear Iran require Israel to reconsider its policy of ambiguity? What is the price of stopping this policy?

Fourth, if a decision is made to carry out a military action, what would be considered an achievement, what would be defined as failure, and what is the price of failure?

Then there is the question of possible repercussions of a successful attack. The first concern is possible violent responses by Iran, both directly and by means of its proxies, Hizbollah and Hamas. Are the scenarios presented in the media – some of them dire – realistic? In contrast, the operative capabilities to cope with these responses are not a subject for public discussion because of the risks of exposure.

The second question concerns Israel's relations with the United States: from a political standpoint, can an Israeli attack occur without consultation and prior coordination with the United States? The possibility that in the event of an Israeli military action Iran would decide to attack US targets in the Gulf or target oil exports cannot be ruled out. In such a case, the United States would be forced to respond, and would thus find itself involved in a military confrontation it did not initiate. This might have serious consequences on American public opinion (not to mention some of its elected officials) toward Israel, which will have involved the United States in a war. On the other hand, Iran does not enjoy much support in the United States, and it is possible that there would be understanding for an Israeli decision to take risks and confront a threat that it deems existential.

A third aspect concerns the implications for Israel's international standing. In spite of Israeli skepticism about the sincerity and firmness of international efforts to confront the emerging Iranian threat, Israel repeatedly makes clear that the threat is not just Israel's "problem" but a global problem, and that therefore the international community must take the lead in stopping the Iranian nuclear program. If Israeli decision makers reach the conclusion that time is running out and they decide to launch a preemptive strike as a legitimate exercise in self-defense, they will still need to deal with the international community's response. The image – not the first of its kind – will be of an Israel unilaterally violating the rules of the international game and launching a military campaign without legitimacy from the Security Council. This might increase Israel's isolation as well contribute to its delegitimization. The severity of the international response would depend on the price paid by the countries of the world for an Israeli action. An action that may prompt an Iranian response that generates instability in the

Gulf and a sharp rise in oil prices in a period of economic crisis. On the other hand, if the price is reasonable, there might be quite a few regional and international players who in retrospect would be pleased that Israel took on itself the risks to solve the problem of Iranian nuclearization.

In conclusion, the day after a possible Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, or the day after acceptance of an Iran with military nuclear capabilities, presents Israel with many challenges. Given the ramifications of the decision one way or the other, Israeli society must address a series of issues and not assume that decision makers will automatically make correct choices based on a rational of an attack's cost effectiveness. Past experience has proven that such an in depth discussion does not always take place. However, a public discussion that addresses the appropriate questions will assist those officials who are authorized to make informed decisions on this issue.

