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Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief), Joanna Troszczyńska (Executive Editor),

Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz, Beata Górka-Winter, Artur Gradziuk,

Leszek Jesień, Beata Wojna

Prospects for Pre-emptive Strikes on Iranian Nuclear Facilities

Marcin Andrzej Piotrowski

Publication of the technical findings of UN inspectors actually changes the content of the international debate on the nuclearisation of Iran. The country represents a threat to U.S. security and its allies in the Middle East. Differences in perceptions of the scale of this threat to the U.S. and Israel are translated into different preferences for military strategy. Although a U.S. pre-emptive strike is unlikely, it *might* not be ruled *out* by Israel.

The Current Context. In November 2011, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) published another report about Iran's nuclear programs. An appendix to this report is the first official document by the agency that provides extensive details about Iran's efforts in the areas of uranium enrichment, weaponisation and adaptation of a warhead to Shahab-3 ballistic missiles. Even before the latest publication by the IAEA there was speculation about possible Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities and the related transfer of the stock of enriched uranium from Natanz to a more secure place near Qom. The agency report then became the impulse for the EU's announcement of further sanctions against Iran and the U.S. has talked with other members of the UN Security Council about the next steps for the international community.

Perceptions of Iranian Threat. A lack of transparency in government and decision-making in Iran, its regional ambitions and the impasse in its cooperation with the UN are all sources of uncertainty about the actual determination of Iran to build its own nuclear arsenal. The disputes are about the rationality of the Iranian authorities, the ratio between their defensive and offensive calculations and the possible shape of Iran's nuclear strategy and arsenal. There is also a lack of agreement about a timeframe in which Iran would build the first warhead. These circumstances have an impact on the different perceptions about the scale of the threat amongst the U.S., Israel and the Gulf countries.

In an assessment by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Iran with its own "nuclear umbrella" will be more aggressively seeking domination in this part of the Middle East by sponsoring Shiite and radical Islamic groups. The concerns of the GCC countries are tied also to the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and the subsequent erosion of American military capabilities in case of provocation or aggression by Iran. From the perspective of Israel, the scale of potential threats is even greater, since Iran has supported Hezbollah, Hamas and the Syrian regime for three decades. The aggressive rhetoric of the Iranian leaders is intensifying the Israeli sense of an existential threat. A nuclear Iran would also cause Israel to lose its nuclear monopoly and qualitative military edge in the Middle East as well as in the long run provoke the nuclearisation of Turkey and Arab states.

The Preferred Strategy for the U.S. Most American policymakers and experts are convinced that the nuclearisation of Iran does not exclude the possibility for a flexible reaction to its challenging implications. For the U.S., a nuclear Iran is not only a regional problem but might have broader effects on global disarmament and nonproliferation. Currently, Iran is not an existential threat to U.S. security and that affects the selection of the preferred overall strategy and military options. For the U.S., the optimal solution is the use of diplomatic and economic pressure on the regime in Iran as well as increasing its international isolation because of its nuclear program, support for terrorism and the repression of Iranian civil society.

A U.S. preventive strike against Iran is unlikely. The U.S. has been involved in an extremely expensive intervention in Iraq and looking for ways out of the stalemate in Afghanistan. An American air campaign against Iran would result in Iranian retaliation on U.S. forces and military bases around the "Greater Middle East". In this context, the main U.S. military strategy is deterrence. This approach is evident in recent years in U.S. relations with the GCC countries and Israel. An American preference for defensive measures also is cause for plans for a phased missile defence system in the U.S. and NATO. The U.S. is encouraging the military integration of the GCC in anticipation of asymmetric attacks. Even after the withdrawal of ground forces from Iraq by the end of 2011, the U.S. will preserve a large military presence in the Gulf region (air bases in the GCC countries and naval forces at sea). U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) is also prepared with various contingency plans for confrontation with Iran that assume additional special operations, air forces and naval forces.

The Doctrine and Practice of a Pre-emption by Israel. The American approach contrasts with the preferred strategy of Israel, which is based on the "(Menachem) Begin doctrine". According to it, Israel will not allow any country in the Middle East to build a nuclear arsenal. This doctrine was announced with Israel's preventive strike on an Iraqi reactor in 1981. This strike caused condemnation by the Arab countries and briefly worsened Israel-U.S. relations. The validity of the "Begin doctrine" also was confirmed with the Israeli air strike on a secret reactor in Syria (2007). However, this Israeli strike was discussed with the U.S. from the planning phase, and provoked only criticism from Iran. The prospect for the nuclearisation of Iran poses a dilemma for Israel about whether to adapt to the strategy of the U.S. or again re-confirm the "Begin doctrine".

The dispersed installations of the Iranian nuclear program (the IAEA is familiar with more than 20 civilian and military facilities and there might be an unknown number of covert installations) makes it difficult to conduct an Israeli strike equally effective to those in Iraq and Syria. This option is questionable for the U.S. and seems to be too controversial for the military in Israel. The armament of Israel with F-35 aircraft that allow for full and repeatable surprise raids is foreseen only by 2015–2017. That is too long a timeframe for Israel because Iran might already have an arsenal of few nuclear warheads on ballistic missiles by then. Currently, Israel would have to rely on its fleet of F-16s and F-15s, and only some of them are adapted to very long-range strikes. The effectiveness of a unilateral Israeli strike on Iran might be limited and equal a high risk of further destabilisation in the region.

Nevertheless, if the Israeli government decides on a strike, then it is possible that some limitations can be overcome by intelligence and military planners. The U.S. and several EU countries have allegedly admitted to Israeli sabotage on the Iranian program, including the use of computer viruses and the elimination of some scientists and leaders of the Revolutionary Guard. Media reports on this subject are worth comparing not only with strikes on Iraq and Syria but also with other previous and now-known Israeli covert operations. There are a lot of similarities between the Iranian case and the sabotage campaigns against the Iraqi and Syrian weapons-of-mass-destruction programs. Moreover, Israeli special operations and air forces have shown their spectacular capabilities with the hostage rescue mission in Entebbe (1976) and air strikes on the PLO's HQ in Tunis (1985). Also Israel's Air Forces have repeatedly demonstrated their capabilities for very long distances, such as during air exercises with Turkey, Greece and India. In a possible confrontation with Iran it is also possible to use Israeli satellite reconnaissance, GPS guidance, the weakness of Iranian air defence systems as well strikes with Jericho long-range ballistic missiles and cruise missiles from warships.

Conclusions. The dossier attached to the recent report by the IAEA about the possible military dimensions of Iran's nuclear program suggests that the Iranians are advanced in their work on a first nuclear warhead. The report by the agency may provide a basis for the next round of UNSC sanctions, though it seems unlikely that Russia and China can be persuaded to join. It is clear that the next sanctions by the U.S., EU and UN could create effective economic pressure and diplomatic isolation of the Iranian regime. In the opinion of Israeli government and experts, these diplomatic measures will not stop Iran's work on building a nuclear arsenal. There also are signs of a lack of full and close coordination of military aspects of the U.S. and Israeli strategy towards Iran. Israel will not allow for inaction on the Iranian issue and may consider very risky options for pre-emptive strikes on Iran. From the U.S. point of view, any unilateral actions by Israel are too risky, and because of that priority has been given to diplomatic options.