



INSS Insight No. 446, July 17, 2013

The Debate on a Military Option against Iran Revisited: When and By Whom?

Zaki Shalom

Countering the sense that given the dramatic events underway in Egypt and Syria there is little urgency regarding the Iranian issue, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu underscored in a July 14 interview to CBS television that the Iranian nuclear threat remains the most urgent and important issue for Israel and the world at large. In the interview Netanyahu directed veiled criticism at the international community's response to the Iranian nuclear challenge on a number of levels. The Prime Minister stressed that Israel does not share the prevailing opinion in the West, including the US administration, that the new Iranian leadership signals moderation in its nuclear ambitions. Rather, the present Iranian leadership continues to forge ahead toward a nuclear capability, and is in fact "a wolf in sheep's clothing" that seeks to elude the West while it continues to "smile and build a bomb." In addition, Netanyahu contended that given that the United States agrees with Israel on the need to prevent Iran's nuclearization, the United States ought to "demonstrate that by action." The Iranians must be persuaded that a credible military option "is truly on the table."

The bottom line is that according to Netanyahu, the Israeli and American "clocks are clicking at a different pace." Moreover, Israel is "closer than the United States [and] more vulnerable and therefore [it will] have to address this question of how to stop Iran, perhaps before the United States does." Therefore, Israel "won't wait until it's too late."

Netanyahu's remarks raise anew the question of possible independent Israeli military action against Iran versus an alternative that appears preferable to Israel, should military action be deemed necessary – an American strike against Iran's nuclear program.

From Israel's point of view, the possibility that the United States will initiate military action against Iran offers several advantages:

- a. US military action against Iran would presumably receive more international legitimacy than would an independent Israeli strike, even if actions are not carried out under the auspices of the United Nations.
- b. The United States has a greater chance of success of destroying Iran's nuclear facilities than does Israel.

c. US action might lessen the severity of Iran's response against Israel.

On the other hand, US military action against Iran may also pose questions regarding Israel's ability to protect itself. Since Israel gained its independence, its security doctrine has been based on the belief that Israel can and should defend itself by the force of its own arms. Prime Minister Netanyahu emphasized this point at a March 20, 2013 press conference with President Obama: "I know that you appreciate that Israel can never cede the right to defend ourselves to others, even to the greatest of our friends. And Israel has no better friend than the United States of America."

Discussion of the Iranian issue seems to have created the impression that to a certain degree this principle is less valid than in the past. This is reflected in the prevailing belief within various circles in the United States, particularly those traditionally less friendly toward Israel, that Israel expects the United States to lead the struggle against Iran, and that it will be the one to act against it, if necessary.

If the US launches a military operation against Iran, American public perception will presumably be that the action was primarily intended to defend Israel. This perception will likely intensify the greater the damage to American interests in the region. As a result, Israel's deterrence against regional states and non-state actors will likely be reduced. In addition, this activity would likely strengthen the position of circles in the United States that for some time have claimed that Israel and its special relationship with the US are a burden to the United States and hurt its international standing on the one hand and its relationship with the Arab world on the other. Finally, the US may ask for something in return for its willingness to protect Israel. American pressure on Israel to adopt difficult positions regarding the peace process could very well increase.

Supporters of the "American option" claim that only the United States has the concrete ability to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities, while Israel will merely be able to inflict temporary damage on these facilities. While it is hard to dispute this argument, Israel may estimate that in order to stop Iran's nuclear activity, or at least drastically limit it, there is no need necessarily to physically destroy Iran's entire nuclear program. If Israel succeeds in causing major damage to Iran's nuclear facilities, this may significantly strengthen elements in the Iranian government that are uncomfortable with their country's nuclear policy and could lead to a resolution of the nuclear issue, specifically as regarding the program's military dimensions, i.e., containing its scope, if not discontinuing it entirely.

At the same time, an American operation against Iran could fail – completely or partially. If this happens, pressure on the Israeli government, both internal and external, to avoid attacking Iran would spiral. The main argument would be that if the US can't do it, then Israel certainly can't. This means limiting Israel's freedom of maneuver.

Supporters of the "American option" contend that if Israel attacks Iran alone, it must expect a massive response by Iran and its regional allies, particularly Hizbollah, whereas if the United States strikes, Iran might decide to direct its response against the US rather than against Israel. This belief, however, might reflect wishful thinking rather than a balanced assessment of the situation. Iran has excellent reason to focus its response on Israel, even if the source of the attack is the United States. First, Iran may assess that Israel, unlike the United States, has political and operational constraints that will limit its use of force against Iran. Second, Israel is considered a "legitimate" target for response in the eyes of many countries, particularly in the region. Third, the deterring repercussion that would accompany a major strike on Israel's central cities and its civilians will be much larger than any attack, even a precise one, on US targets in the Gulf.

Conclusion

From statements by senior Israeli officials on the Iranian nuclear program, some explicit and others implicit, it can be understood that if and when it becomes clear that no choice exists other than military action against Iran, Israel believes that such action would be better carried out by the US and not by Israel. This "America first" approach has a logic of its own, and undoubtedly as far as Israel is concerned has many advantages over independent Israeli action. At the same time, Israel must take into account the possible negative results of this course of action. Awareness of these potential consequences will allow it to contain the damage if and when this option is realized.

