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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Using Bombs to Stave Off War

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Li-On, Israel

ISRAEL will almost surely attack Iran's nuclear sites in the next four to seven months — and the leaders in Washington and even Tehran should hope that the attack will be successful enough to cause at least a significant delay in the Iranian production schedule, if not complete destruction, of that country's nuclear program. Because if the attack fails, the Middle East will almost certainly face a nuclear war — either through a subsequent pre-emptive Israeli nuclear strike or a nuclear exchange shortly after Iran gets the bomb.

It is in the interest of neither Iran nor the United States (nor, for that matter, the rest of the world) that Iran be savaged by a nuclear strike, or that both Israel and Iran suffer such a fate. We know what would ensue: a traumatic destabilization of the Middle East with resounding political and military consequences around the globe, serious injury to the West's oil supply and radioactive pollution of the earth's atmosphere and water.

But should Israel's conventional assault fail to significantly harm or stall the Iranian program, a ratcheting up of the Iranian-Israeli conflict to a nuclear level will most likely follow. Every intelligence agency in the world believes the Iranian program is geared toward making weapons, not to the peaceful applications of nuclear power. And, despite the current talk of additional economic sanctions, everyone knows that such measures have so far led nowhere and are unlikely to be applied with sufficient scope to cause Iran real pain, given Russia's and China's continued recalcitrance and Western Europe's (and America's) ambivalence in behavior, if not in rhetoric. Western intelligence agencies agree that Iran will reach the "point of no return" in acquiring the capacity to produce nuclear weapons in one to four years.

Which leaves the world with only one option if it wishes to halt Iran's march toward nuclear weaponry: the military option, meaning an aerial assault by either the United States or Israel. Clearly, America has the conventional military capacity to do the job, which would involve a protracted air assault against Iran's air defenses followed by strikes on the nuclear sites themselves. But, as a result of the Iraq imbroglio, and what is rapidly turning into the Afghan imbroglio, the American public has little enthusiasm for wars in the Islamic lands. This curtails

the White House's ability to begin yet another major military campaign in pursuit of a goal that is not seen as a vital national interest by many Americans.

Which leaves only Israel — the country threatened almost daily with destruction by Iran's leaders. Thus the recent reports about Israeli plans and preparations to attack Iran (the period from Nov. 5 to Jan. 19 seems the best bet, as it gives the West half a year to try the diplomatic route but ensures that Israel will have support from a lame-duck White House).

The problem is that Israel's military capacities are far smaller than America's and, given the distances involved, the fact that the Iranian sites are widely dispersed and underground, and Israel's inadequate intelligence, it is unlikely that the Israeli conventional forces, even if allowed the use of Jordanian and Iraqi airspace (and perhaps, pending American approval, even Iraqi air strips) can destroy or perhaps significantly delay the Iranian nuclear project.

Nonetheless, Israel, believing that its very existence is at stake — and this is a feeling shared by most Israelis across the political spectrum — will certainly make the effort. Israel's leaders, from Prime Minister Ehud Olmert down, have all explicitly stated that an Iranian bomb means Israel's destruction; Iran will not be allowed to get the bomb.

The best outcome will be that an Israeli conventional strike, whether failed or not — and, given the Tehran regime's totalitarian grip, it may not be immediately clear how much damage the Israeli assault has caused — would persuade the Iranians to halt their nuclear program, or at least persuade the Western powers to significantly increase the diplomatic and economic pressure on Iran.

But the more likely result is that the international community will continue to do nothing effective and that Iran will speed up its efforts to produce the bomb that can destroy Israel. The Iranians will also likely retaliate by attacking Israel's cities with ballistic missiles (possibly topped with chemical or biological warheads); by prodding its local clients, Hezbollah and Hamas, to unleash their own armories against Israel; and by activating international Muslim terrorist networks against Israeli and Jewish — and possibly American — targets worldwide (though the Iranians may at the last moment be wary of provoking American military involvement).

Such a situation would confront Israeli leaders with two agonizing, dismal choices. One is to allow the Iranians to acquire the bomb and hope for the best — meaning a nuclear standoff, with the prospect of mutual assured destruction preventing the Iranians from actually using the weapon. The other would be to use the Iranian counterstrikes as an excuse to escalate and use the only means available that will actually destroy the Iranian nuclear project: Israel's own nuclear arsenal.

Given the fundamentalist, self-sacrificial mindset of the mullahs who run Iran, Israel knows that

deterrence may not work as well as it did with the comparatively rational men who ran the Kremlin and White House during the cold war. They are likely to use any bomb they build, both because of ideology and because of fear of Israeli nuclear pre-emption. Thus an Israeli nuclear strike to prevent the Iranians from taking the final steps toward getting the bomb is probable. The alternative is letting Tehran have its bomb. In either case, a Middle Eastern nuclear holocaust would be in the cards.

Iran's leaders would do well to rethink their gamble and suspend their nuclear program. Bar this, the best they could hope for is that Israel's conventional air assault will destroy their nuclear facilities. To be sure, this would mean thousands of Iranian casualties and international humiliation. But the alternative is an Iran turned into a nuclear wasteland. Some Iranians may believe that this is a worthwhile gamble if the prospect is Israel's demise. But most Iranians probably don't.

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