

Israel's Worst Nightmare. Contra Iran

By Yossi Klein Halevi & Michael B. Oren *The New Republic*, January 26, 2007

The first reports from military intelligence about an Iranian nuclear program reached the desk of Yitzhak Rabin shortly after he became prime minister in May 1992. Rabin's conclusion was unequivocal: Only a nuclear Iran, he told aides, could pose an existential threat to which Israel would have no credible response. But, when he tried to warn the Clinton administration, he met with incredulity. The CIA's assessment--which wouldn't change until 1998--was that Iran's nuclear program was civilian, not military. Israeli security officials felt that the CIA's judgment was influenced by internal U.S. politics and privately referred to the agency as the "CPIA"--"P" for "politicized."

The indifference in Washington helped persuade Rabin that Israel needed to begin preparing for an eventual preemptive strike, so he ordered the purchase of long-range bombers capable of reaching Iran. And he made a fateful political decision: He reversed his ambivalence toward negotiating with the PLO and endorsed unofficial talks being conducted between Israeli left-wingers and PLO officials. Rabin's justification for this about-face was that Israel needed to neutralize what he defined as its "inner circle of threat"--the enemies along its borders--in order to focus on the coming confrontation with Iran, the far more dangerous "outer circle of threat." Rabin's strategy, then, was the exact opposite of the approach recently recommended by the Iraq Study Group: Where James Baker and Lee Hamilton want to engage Iran--even at the cost of downplaying its nuclear ambitions--in order to solve crises in the Arab world, Rabin wanted to make peace with the Arab world in order to prevent, at all costs, a nuclear Iran.

Now, more than a decade later, the worst-case scenario envisioned by Rabin is rapidly approaching. According to Israeli intelligence, Iran will be able to produce a nuclear bomb as soon as 2009. In Washington, fear is growing that either Israel or the Bush administration plans to order strikes against Iran. In Israel, however, there is fear of a different kind. Israelis worry not that the West will act rashly, but that it will fail to act at all. And, while strategists here differ over the relative efficacy of sanctions or a military strike, nearly everyone agrees on this point: Israel cannot live with a nuclear Iran.

For over two decades, since the era of former Prime Minister Menachem Begin, the Holocaust was rarely invoked, except on the extremes, in Israeli politics. In recent months, though, the Iranian threat has returned the Final Solution to the heart of Israeli discourse. Senior army commanders, who likely once regarded Holocaust analogies with the Middle East conflict as an affront to Zionist empowerment, now routinely speak of a "second Holocaust." Op-eds, written by left-wing as well as right-wing commentators, compare these times to the 1930s. Israelis recall how the international community reacted with indifference as a massively armed nation declared war against the Jewish people--and they sense a similar pattern today. Even though the United States and Europe have finally awakened to the Iranian nuclear threat, Iran's calls for the destruction of Israel tend to be dismissed as mere rhetoric by the Western news media. Yet, here in Israel, those pronouncements have reinforced Rabin's urgency in placing the Iran situation at the top of the strategic agenda.

One of the men most responsible for doing precisely that is Labor Party parliamentarian and current Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh, whom Rabin entrusted with his government's "Iran file." Like most in the defense establishment, Sneh doesn't believe Iran would immediately launch a nuclear attack against Israel. But, he adds, it won't have to actually use the bomb to cripple Israel. "They would be able to destroy the Zionist dream without pressing the button," he says.

In clipped tones that reveal his long military background, he outlines three repercussions of an Iranian bomb. To begin with, he notes, the era of peace negotiations will come to an end: "No Arab partner

will be able to make concessions with a nuclear Iran standing over them." What's more, Israel will find its military options severely limited. An emboldened Iran could provide Hezbollah and Hamas with longer-range and deadlier rockets than their current stock of Katyushas and Qassams; yet, threatened with a nuclear response, Israel would have little defense against intensifying rocket fire on its northern and southern periphery, whose residents would have to be evacuated to the center. Israel already experienced a foretaste of mass uprooting in the Lebanon war last summer, when hundreds of thousands of Galilee residents were turned into temporary refugees. Finally, says Sneh, foreign investors will flee the country, and many Israelis will, too. In one recent poll, 27 percent of Israelis said they would consider leaving if Iran went nuclear. "Who will leave? Those with opportunities abroad--the elite," Sneh notes. The promise of Zionism to create a Jewish refuge will have failed, and, instead, Jews will see the diaspora as a more trustworthy option for both personal and collective survival. During the Lebanon war, Israeli television's preeminent satirical comedy, "O What a Wonderful Land," interviewed an Israeli claiming that "this" is the safest place for Jews--as the camera pulled back to reveal that "this" was London.

Even without the bomb, Iran's threat to Israel is growing. Working through Shia Hezbollah, Alawite Damascus, and Sunni Hamas, Tehran has extended its influence into Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian territories. As a result of Hezbollah's perceived victory in the Lebanon war and Hamas's ability to continue firing rockets at Israeli towns despite repeated army incursions into Gaza, Iran has proved it can attack Israel with near-impunity. Iranian newspapers are replete with stories gloating over the supposed erosion of Israel's will to fight and the imminent collapse of its "postmodern" army, as one recent article put it. Iran's self-confidence has been bolstered by Israel's failure to extract a price from Tehran for instigating the Lebanon war and for funding terrorist operations as far back as the early '90s, when Iran masterminded the bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires and, two years later, that city's Jewish community headquarters. Nor has Israel--to say nothing of the U.N. peacekeeping forces--managed to prevent Hezbollah from rearming. And, if Iran manages to overcome U.S. threats and U.N. sanctions and achieve nuclear capability, it will be seen throughout the Muslim world as unstoppable.

A nuclear Iran will have devastating consequences for Sunni Arab states, too. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and, most recently, Jordan have declared their interest in acquiring nuclear power; Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has stated explicitly that Egypt may feel the need to protect itself against Iran's nuclear threat. Other Sunni nations could follow--including Libya, whose enmity toward the Saudis may draw it back into the nuclear race if Riyadh tries to acquire a bomb. A nuclear free-for-all, then, is likely to seize the Middle East. In this crisis-ridden region, any flashpoint will become a potential nuclear flashpoint.

The reverberations of a nuclear Iran will reach far beyond the Middle East. Tehran could dictate the price of oil and even control much of its supply through the Straits of Hormuz. And Iran will be able to conduct terrorist operations through its proxies with greater immunity. Even without the nuclear threat, Iran succeeded in intimidating the Saudis into releasing Iranian suspects in the 1997 Khobar Towers bombing. Moreover, if Tehran goes nuclear, the pretense of an international community capable of enforcing world order would quickly unravel: After all, if a regime that has perpetrated terrorist attacks from Argentina to the Persian Gulf can flout sanctions and acquire nuclear weapons, how can the United Nations credibly stop anyone else from doing the same?

And these terrifying scenarios exclude the most terrifying scenario of all: Iran uses its bomb. In a poll, 66 percent of Israelis said they believed Iran would drop a nuclear weapon on the Jewish state. Though defense experts are divided over the likelihood of an Iranian nuclear attack, every strategist we spoke with for this article considered the scenario plausible. "No one knows if Iran would use the bomb or not," says Sneh. "But I can't take the chance."

The threat of a theologically motivated nuclear assault against Israel tends to be downplayed in the West; not so here. The former head of Israel's National Security Council, Giora Eiland, has warned that an apocalyptically driven Mahmoud Ahmadinejad would be willing to sacrifice half his country's population to obliterate the Jewish state. Military men suddenly sound like theologians when explaining the Iranian threat. Ahmadinejad, they argue, represents a new "activist" strain of Shiism,

which holds that the faithful can hasten the return of the Hidden Imam, the Shia messiah, by destroying evil. Hebrew University Iranian scholar Eldad Pardo goes further, arguing that the ideology founded by Ayatollah Khomeini represents nothing less than a "new religion," combining Shia, Sunni, and Marxist beliefs and resembling Western messianic cults that have advocated mass suicide. And so Ahmadinejad's pronouncements about the imminent return of the Hidden Imam and the imminent destruction of Israel aren't regarded as merely calculated for domestic consumption; they are seen as glimpses into an apocalyptic game plan. Ahmadinejad has reportedly told his Cabinet that the Hidden Imam will reappear in 2009--precisely the date when Israel estimates Iran will go nuclear. In a recent meeting with outgoing U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, the Iranian president predicted that, while the United States and Great Britain won the last world war, Iran will win the next one. And, two weeks ago, an Iranian government website declared that the Hidden Imam would defeat his archenemy in a final battle in Jerusalem. Notes one former top-ranking Israeli defense official: "We may not yet have located a clear theological line connecting the dots, but there are a great many dots." At least one ayatollah, though, has made that theology explicit: In 2005, Hussein Nuri Hamdani declared that "the Jews should be fought against and forced to surrender to prepare the way for the coming of the Hidden Imam."

Defense experts readily acknowledge that Ahmadinejad is hardly all-powerful and must yield to the Council of Guardians. In recent elections, almost all the clerics allied with Ahmadinejad lost; and, in an unprecedented move, 150 Iranian parliamentarians signed a letter blaming the president for growing inflation and unemployment. But none of this reassures Israelis. That's because Ahmadinejad is hardly alone in conjuring doomsday scenarios. In February 2006, clerics in Qom issued a fatwa permitting nuclear war. And former Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, speaking at a 2001 "Jerusalem Day" rally, declared: "If, one day, the Islamic world is also equipped with weapons like those that Israel possesses now, then the imperialists' strategy will reach a standstill, because the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything. However, it will only harm the Islamic world. It is not irrational to contemplate such an eventuality."

Given these nightmarish scenarios, one would expect to find a mood of near-despair within the Israeli defense establishment. Yet senior officials believe that events are actually working in Israel's favor and that, one way or another, Iran's nuclear program can still be stopped. Partly, that is because Israel's assessments of Iran's intention to acquire nuclear weapons have finally been accepted not only by Washington but even by the Europeans. After years of isolation on the Iranian issue, Israelis are basking in a rare moment of international credibility.

As a result, some in the defense establishment are convinced that the military option can still be forestalled, even at this late date, by aggressive economic sanctions, forcing the Iranian regime to choose between its nuclear program and domestic stability. To be sure, even the most optimistic Israelis believe that the recent U.N. decision to impose minimal sanctions on Iran will prove ineffective. Indeed, those sanctions--intended to prevent nuclear materials and know-how from reaching Iran and to stop its nuclear program from becoming self-sufficient--are uniformly dismissed as coming at least two years too late, since Iran is rapidly approaching nuclear self-sufficiency and, some here believe, may have already reached that point.

But sanctions advocates do believe that, by formally placing Iran in the category of "threat to international peace," the United Nations has tacitly empowered the United States and its allies to pursue more aggressive sanctions that could trigger Iranian instability--such as the Bush administration's quiet efforts over the last year to force foreign banks out of Tehran. Combined with Iran's preexisting social and economic problems--massive hidden unemployment, widespread corruption, and growing drug addiction and prostitution--and hatred for the regime among students and the middle class, aggressive sanctions could, some Israelis believe, hasten regime change in Tehran by forcing the Iranian people to pay the price for their leaders' provocations. And, with regime change, of course, the threat posed by an Iranian bomb would ease: After all, the problem isn't the nuclearization of Iran but the nuclearization of this Iran. The very threat of additional sanctions has already led to drastic increases in food and housing prices in Tehran--and may have emboldened those parliamentarians who signed the recent protest letter to Ahmadinejad. "The Iranians are a very proud people," says one Israeli official with years of experience inside Iran. "They won't be able to

bear being turned into pariahs, and that will increase their resentment toward the regime."

Along with sanctions, some Israeli officials call for a robust but nonviolent U.S. intervention in internal Iranian politics--funding the Iranian opposition, transforming U.S. broadcasts in Farsi into "Radio Free Iran," reaching Farsi audiences through the Internet, and more aggressively challenging the Iranian government on its human rights abuses. Israeli advocates of regime change have been pressing Washington to adopt these policies for years and can't understand why even the Bush administration has demurred. "No one is saying not to plan for military action," says the official with experience in Iran. "But, given the devastating consequences of a military strike, why aren't we giving this a chance?"

Skeptics of sanctions note that the time frame is too narrow and the stakes too high for Israel to place its hopes on long-term regime change. They insist that the international community is incapable of mounting effective sanctions, which would almost certainly be violated by Russia and China. Yes, they acknowledge, the ayatollahs' regime is in trouble and will eventually fall--but not soon enough. Indeed, optimists have been predicting imminent regime change for over a decade; and, when failed reformer Mohammed Khatami became president in 1997, some in the West declared that regime change had already begun. But Iran's leaders know how to defend themselves against opponents: When bus drivers organized a wildcat strike last year, the leader was arrested and his tongue was cut off.

For those Israelis who are skeptical of sanctions, there is the option of last resort: a military strike. Experts readily acknowledge the complexity of an attack against Iran's nuclear facilities, since they are scattered over dozens of sites, many heavily fortified and deep underground. But an attack on three key sites--especially the uranium-enrichment facility at Natanz--would set back Iranian plans by several years. It would not be necessary, the former top-ranking defense official says, to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities: By repeatedly hitting their entrances, the sites could be rendered inaccessible. At the same time, Israel would probably bomb key government installations, like Revolutionary Guard bases, to weaken the regime's ability to recover. While the Iranian people are likely to initially rally around the government, the combined effect of a military attack and economic sanctions could trigger an eventual uprising, suggests the former defense official. Periodic air strikes, he adds, would impede attempts to rebuild the nuclear sites.

Defense experts downplay the possibility of secret facilities unknown to Western intelligence agencies. "If we can locate a suicide bomber as he moves from place to place, then we know how to locate static targets, even deep underground," says the former defense official. Nor are those facilities as impenetrable as some foreign news reports suggest. Noted Yuval Steinitz, former chairman of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee: "The Iranians are signaling us that the nuclear project is vulnerable. Whoever spends several billion dollars just for anti-aircraft systems around nuclear sites is saying that those sites are vulnerable. There would be no need to invest those sums if their bunkers were deep enough [to avoid an air strike]."

The Israeli air force has been actively preparing for an attack since 1993, enhancing the range of its bombers and acquiring the requisite bunker-busting ordnance. "Technically, we have the ability" to strike key facilities, a former commander of the air force told us. While the army's reputation was battered during the Lebanon war, the air force, by contrast, performed well, routinely destroying Hezbollah's long-range missile sites within less than five minutes following a launch.

Despite a recent report in the London Sunday Times that Israel is planning a tactical nuclear attack on Iran's nuclear sites, Israel will almost certainly not introduce nuclear weapons into the Middle East battlefield. The story, likely planted and then promptly denied, was probably part of an ongoing Israeli attempt to accomplish two objectives: to warn the international community that, if it fails to stop Iran through sanctions, then "crazy Israel" will be unleashed; and to prevent the Iranian crisis from turning into an Israeli issue alone.

An Israeli assault could only delay Iran's nuclear program, not eliminate it. That's because Israel cannot sustain an air campaign against such remote targets for days on end. This can only be accomplished by the United States, perhaps together with NATO allies, by mounting an ongoing

series of air strikes similar to the "shock and awe" campaign conducted against Iraq at the beginning of the war. Israelis, though, are divided over the likelihood of U.S. military action. Some experts believe President Bush will attack, if only to prevent being recorded by history as a leader who fought the wrong war while failing to fight the right one. Others speculate that a politically devastated Bush will leave the resolution of the Iranian crisis to his successor.

If Israel is forced, by default, to strike, it is likely to happen within the next 18 months. An attack needs to take place before the nuclear facilities become radioactive; waiting too long could result in massive civilian casualties. Still, Israel will almost certainly wait until it becomes clear that sanctions have failed and that the United States or NATO won't strike. The toughest decision, then, will be timing: determining that delicate moment when it becomes clear that the international community has failed but before the facilities turn lethal.

Israel will alert Washington before a strike: "We won't surprise the Americans, given the likelihood of Iranian reprisals against American troops in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East," says an analyst close to the intelligence community. U.S. permission will be needed if Israel chooses to send its planes over Iraqi air space--and the expectation here is that permission would be granted. (Israel has two other possible attack routes, both problematic: over Turkish air space and along the Saudi-Iraqi border to the Persian Gulf.) Still, according to the former air force commander, if Israel decides to act, "We will act alone, not as emissaries of anyone else."

Regardless of whether Israeli or other Western forces carry out the strike, Iran will almost certainly retaliate against the Jewish state. Experts disagree, though, about the extent of the Iranian onslaught and Israel's ability to withstand it. Some say that, though Iranian missiles will strike Israeli cities and Hezbollah Katyushas and Hamas Qassams will fall in massive numbers, Israel's anti-ballistic and civil defense systems, combined with its retaliatory capability, will suffice to contain the threat. Optimists also downplay Iran's ability to mount terrorist attacks in the West: September 11 has produced an unprecedented level of cooperation among Western intelligence services, and they are monitoring sleeper cells as well as Iranian diplomats, who are believed to have used their privileged access to smuggle explosives.

The pessimists' scenario, though, is daunting. Not only could Iranian missiles--perhaps carrying chemical warheads--devastate Israeli cities, but, if the Syrians join in, then thousands of additional long-range missiles will fall, too. And, if Israel retaliates by bombing Damascus, that could trigger public demands in other Arab countries to join the war against Israel. The result could be a conventional threat to Israel's existence.

That scenario leads some in the security establishment to call for renewed peace talks with Syria, aimed at removing it from the pro-Iranian front. The growing debate over Syria positions the Mossad--which says it's no longer possible to separate Damascus from Tehran--against military intelligence, which believes that President Bashar Assad wants negotiations with Israel, if only to divert the threat of sanctions against Damascus for its alleged role in murdering Lebanese leaders.

There is no debate among Israelis, however, about the wisdom of negotiations between the West and Iran. That, defense officials agree, would be the worst of all options. Negotiations that took place now would be happening at a time when Iran feels ascendant: The time to have negotiated with Iran, some say, was immediately after the initial U.S. triumph in Iraq, not now, when the United States is losing the war. Under these circumstances, negotiations would only buy the regime time to continue its nuclear program. Talks would create baseless hope, undermining the urgency of sanctions. And resuming negotiations with the Iranian regime--despite its repeated bad faith in previous talks over its nuclear program--would send the wrong message to the Iranian people: that the regime has international legitimacy and that resisting it is futile.

Hovering over Israeli discourse about a nuclear Iran is the recent Holocaust-denial conference in Tehran--and what Israelis regard as the scandalously inadequate international response. While the conference was condemned in the West, Israelis expected the international community to treat it as something more than a bizarre sideshow. Indeed, for Israelis, the conference offered the clearest warning yet on the true nature of the Iranian threat to the Jewish state.

In denying the Holocaust, Ahmadinejad aims to undermine what he believes to be the sole justification for Israel's existence. In the years before World War II, Nazi propagandists prepared Europe for the Final Solution by dehumanizing the Jews; now, Ahmadinejad is preparing the Muslim world for the destruction of the Jewish state by delegitimizing its history. And not just the Muslim world: Holocaust denial is also aimed at the West, which many Muslims believe supports Israel only because of Holocaust guilt. Strip away that guilt, and Israel is defenseless. "The resolution of the Holocaust issue will end in the destruction of Israel," commented Mohammad Ali Ramin, head of a new Iranian government institute devoted to Holocaust denial.

The French philosopher André Glucksmann has noted that, by threatening to destroy Israel and by attaining the means to do so, Iran violates the twin taboos on which the post-World War II order was built: never again Auschwitz; never again Hiroshima. The international community now has an opportunity to uphold that order. If it fails, then Israel will have no choice but to uphold its role as refuge of the Jewish people. A Jewish state that allows itself to be threatened with nuclear weapons--by a country that denies the genocide against Europe's six million Jews while threatening Israel's six million Jews--will forfeit its right to speak in the name of Jewish history. Fortunately, even the government of Ehud Olmert, widely criticized as incompetent and corrupt, seems to understand that, on this issue at least, it cannot fail.

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