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**Assessment Report**

# **Israel and the Iranian Nuclear Program**

**Policy Analysis Unit- ACRPS**

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***Assessment Report***

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## Introduction

For nearly two decades, the Iranian nuclear program has doggedly maintained a position at the top of Israeli security and political agenda. From an Israeli perspective, the end result of an Iranian nuclear program would spell the end of the regional Israeli monopoly on nuclear weapons within the Middle East strategic balance; something that would create a strategic change in the balance of power in the Middle East in a radical and an unprecedented way, and also create a new reality in which Iran becomes a strong and influential regional power.

The focus of Israel's efforts, for almost two decades, has been how to prevent Iran from developing its nuclear program. Israel has been and still is, the main driving force for international efforts to stop the Iranian nuclear program. However, Israel has endeavored to conceal that it has taken the major role in mobilizing the international campaign against the Iranian nuclear program, and portrays it as if it were an international concern, and not only an Israeli priority. In order to achieve this, it has continued to portray the Iranian nuclear program as primarily a threat to world peace and the Arab Gulf states neighboring Iran. According to this Israeli narrative, the possession by Iran of nuclear weapons would unsettle regional stability in the Middle East, pose an existential threat to the Israeli state and set the stage for a Middle East-wide arms race, into which Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey would be enlisted. Accordingly, Israel believes that the international community and especially the US and Europe should take appropriate action to halt the Iranian nuclear program.

In order to achieve this, Israel calls for imposing painful and sustained sanctions on Iran under the umbrella of the United Nations Security Council. Yet should Iran continue to develop its nuclear capabilities in spite of these sanctions, then, from the Israeli point of view, the international community, and particularly the United States, should be prepared to use force to prevent Iran from manufacturing a nuclear weapon. Ever since, the Israelis have consistently maintained that they always reserve for themselves the option of striking a direct military blow to the Iranian nuclear facilities as an "option of last resort", should the Iranian nuclear program come close to producing a nuclear weapon.<sup>1</sup>

## The position of Netanyahu and Barak

Behind its continued insistence on retaining for itself the option of a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities, Israel aims to coerce powerful countries to heighten, accelerate and impose more painful sanctions on Iran in order to avoid the eruption of a war in this strategic

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<sup>1</sup> Ephraim Kam, *A Nuclear Iran*, Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2007). See also: Tamar Ginzburg and Moty Cristal (eds.), *A Nuclear Iran: Confronting the challenge on the international arena*, Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2010.

region, which would be caused by an Israeli strike against Iranian nuclear facilities.<sup>2</sup> This is the prism through which one can view, the recent and repeated statements of the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Defense Minister Ehud Barak which hinted again at the possibility of using Israeli military power against Iranian nuclear facilities; these were greeted by an intense and unprecedented flurry of talks and lively debates in various Israeli media centered on the question of Iran's nuclear program, in the few weeks preceding the release of the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) report on Iran's nuclear capabilities, which was released in November of last year.<sup>3</sup> At the time of its release Netanyahu, Barak, and their aides leaked information, analyses and news to journalists held in high regard by the Hebrew-language media, with the aim of placing the Iranian nuclear program at the forefront of the world agenda<sup>4</sup>, in order to press for new and painful UN sanctions on Iran. Furthermore, Netanyahu and Barak attempted to minimize the 'damage' to the Israeli deterrence capabilities vis a vis the Iranian nuclear program, caused by the statements made by Meir Dagan, the former head of Mossad.

Dagan has made numerous public statements since his resignation as the head of Mossad in December 2010, in which he has stressed his opposition to an Israeli military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities, positing that the Israelis would pay a heavy price for any such action, and that the Iranian efforts had already been hindered; Dagan further suggested that Iran would not be able to assemble a nuclear warhead before 2014. Both Netanyahu and Barak have expressed the opinion that these statements have harmed Israeli security interests and have hampered efforts to place increasingly stringent sanctions upon Iran.<sup>5</sup>

The reports and analyses of the Israeli journalists that were based on information from the leaks of Netanyahu, Barak and their aides, carried a clear message that Iran is getting very close to having the capability of manufacturing a nuclear weapon and that the use of Israeli military force to end this would become inevitable in order to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

Yet, the statements issued by Netanyahu, Barak and their aides have left unanswered the important and frequently-raised question: Is Israel capable of striking Iran's nuclear facilities

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<sup>2</sup> See for example the article: Ephraim Kam, "Where does the report on Iran lead to", *Israel Today*, November 13, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board report, November 2011, <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2011/gov2011-65.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Yossi Melman, "Nuclear Maneuver," *Haaretz*, November 4, 2011  
<http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/article-print-page/1.1556810>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

without American approval? The most Ehud Barak has said on this matter is: “There may be situations in which Israel should defend its vital interests without leaning on another power.”<sup>6</sup>

Many Israeli analysts<sup>7</sup> argue that Netanyahu and Barak’s statements about striking Iran’s nuclear facilities are a maneuver and that they are waging a psychological war on world leaders to blackmail them and push them towards imposing painful economic sanctions of a kind that Iran cannot endure, such as sanctions on Iran’s central bank and oil sector.

### **The position of the Israeli Military-Security Establishment toward a possible strike against Iran.**

There is an Israeli consensus – in both military and civilian arenas – on the need to preserve the “Israeli right to strike” against any Iranian nuclear installations. However what is currently being debated amongst Israelis, revolves around two opinions concerning activating this option and the various factors that affect its activation. Primary amongst these concerns are: the US position with regards to such a strike, questions of coordination with this ally; and gaining its clear approval, the question of timing of any such strike which is tied to an assessment of how far Iran has progressed in its efforts in developing a nuclear weapon, and also, the assessment of the results of any such strike, and how it would impact Israel, the region and the world.

These issues are brought to light by the reality of alternatives available to an Israeli strike that could halt, disrupt or jam the nuclear program, including harsh international economic sanctions against Iran, obstruction operations by the Israeli Directory of Military Intelligence (Aman) and Mossad in a cyberspace war against the Iranian nuclear facilities<sup>8</sup>, intelligence sabotage operations against Iranian nuclear facilities, and the assassination of Iranian scientists.

Counter to the brash position of Netanyahu and Barak, as it appears from their public statements, which press for a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities at the earliest opportunity, one can deduce from the nature of the leaks fed to the Israeli media that the Israeli security-military establishment are opposed to the idea of striking Iranian nuclear installations at the present time; instead, they caution against moving too hastily before other options are exhausted, and they also

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<sup>6</sup> Amos Harel, “The debate about Iran came out from behind closed doors – and the political arena became dizzy” *Haaretz*, November 2, 2011: <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/article-print-page/1.1545766>

<sup>7</sup> See for example: Yossi Melman, “Nuclear Maneuver,” *op.cit.*, as well as: Ofer Shelah, “We meet next spring,” *Maariv*, November 21, 2011: <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/305/026.html?hp=1&cat=479>

<sup>8</sup> For more information about the cyber war against the Iranian nuclear program, see: Shmuel Even, David Seaman-Tov, *A war in cyberspace: directions and implications for Israel*, Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2011.

call for the examination of the possible repercussions of an Israeli strike and the possibility that it could lead to a war in the region and the implications of this for Israel. The military and security establishment place great importance on the position of the United States towards such a military move by the Israelis against Iran's nuclear facilities, and, at any rate, the Israeli military establishment believes that Israel should strike only as a last resort and only when 'the knife touches the neck' – to quote Dagan, and in full coordination with the US. This is the general view adopted by the majority of the present military-security leadership, including, and particularly, the chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the head of the Directorate of Military Intelligence (Aman), the director of the Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations (Mossad), and the director of the Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet).

### **Difficulties and Complications Arising from any Israeli Military Strike**

Israel has made a determined effort to complete the necessary preparations – in terms of arms and training – for a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. For some time, the Israelis have had the capacity to carry out such a strike, through the use of their Air Force and long-range missile capability. Yet, unlike the strikes against the Iraqi nuclear Osiris (1981) and the (alleged) Syrian reactor at Deir az Zour (2007), a military operation against Iranian nuclear facilities faces difficult and dangerous operational challenges and many problems which add to the hesitance of Israeli decision makers. The most important of these difficulties are: the remote distance of the Iranian nuclear facilities from Israel that range between 1200 and 1500 kilometers, the spread of these facilities over various locations in Iran, an issue that requires precise coordination in order to simultaneously hit several targets and ensure surprise. Additionally, the need to refuel in the air only once, if Israeli aircraft cross Jordanian, Iraqi and Saudi Arabian airspace, and twice, if it needs to cross the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, an issue that would complicate the process and increase the danger because of the chance of bringing down refueling aircraft.

Given the fortifications as well as the defense system comprising missiles, guns and aircraft which protect entrenched Iranian facilities, as well as the other factors mentioned above, any Israeli actions against Iran would require the use of a relatively large Israeli attack force – more than a hundred aircraft, at least – which would include bombers, fighter jets and refueling aircraft. In the last few years, Israel has conducted many practice exercises for such an operation in the Mediterranean region, fitted out its aircraft with the necessary equipment, sought to collect accurate information using satellites launched especially for this purpose, as well as through its intelligence services. Israel has also made sure to equip its aircraft with smart bombs capable of penetrating underground bunkers, and bombs with enormous destructive capacity weighing up to two tons. All of these preparations notwithstanding, there remain doubts that an air strike against Iranian nuclear facilities could achieve its goals. There is a belief that if Israel strikes the nuclear facilities, the results would be limited, given the short time Israeli aircraft can remain in Iranian airspace because of the distance and the need to refuel. Furthermore, a single Israeli strike or even a pair of strikes are unlikely to cause real harm to Iran's nuclear facilities given how

fortified they are, with some installations being underground and spread out throughout the country's territory. The destruction of such installations might require several sustained attacks, at a level which Israel is incapable of carrying out. It is also quite possible that Iran would be able to hide a number of its facilities from the attention of Israeli and Western intelligence agencies, and be able to continue operating them in spite of a military strike.

Besides Meir Dagan's opposition to an Israeli military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities at the present time, a number of other articles and analyses, which are critical of the Barak-Netanyahu fast-paced drive for a strike on Iran, have sought to address the concerns pertaining to the issue of a nuclear-capable Iran; of these, some are opposed to the very idea of a nuclear strike. A recent article published by the retired Israeli Major-General Herzl Shapir provides us with an indication of the general way of thinking of the higher command within the military and security establishments. Shapir, who has written to both the Israeli Defense Minister and the IDF Chief of Staff<sup>9</sup> on this matter, published an article<sup>10</sup> in October, 2011 entitled: "Israel Must Not Attack Iran." According to Shapir, an Israeli strike against Iran could lead to a breakout of war in the entire region, and could lead to a number of Iranian retaliatory strikes, including:

1. Missiles strikes against Israeli or US targets in the Middle East region;
2. The limited risk of an Iranian air force strike against Israeli targets;
3. The activation of the Iranian navy against Israeli and US targets;
4. Prompting Hezbollah and Hamas to bomb Israel;
5. Attacks against US targets in Iraq;
6. The commissioning of "terrorist" actions against Jewish, Israeli or American targets;
7. Reducing exports of oil and gas, leading to a rise in prices;
8. Hitting ships crossing the Straits of Hormuz, or in the Gulf;
9. Closing the Strait of Hormuz to oil tankers, through which approximately 40 percent of the world's oil exports travel.

Herzl Shapir also made reference in his article to a fact mentioned in analyses commissioned by the US National Security Council, and recently undertaken by American research centres: namely, that any nation wishing to attack Iranian nuclear facilities needs to be prepared to deal with the fall-out of any such attack, and, specifically, with the Iranian military's retaliation to any such attack. Any country which does not have the capability to deal with such retaliation should

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<sup>9</sup> Ofer Shelah, "We meet next spring," same as *op.cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Herzl Shapir, "Israel should not attack Iran," *Haaretz*, October 19, 2011: <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/article-print-page/1.1526311>

avoid a strike against Iran; the Israelis, indeed, do not have such a capability. Shapir's conclusion is that the United States is the only party capable of striking Iranian nuclear sites, being as it is the only power with the ability to respond to and deal with any potential Iranian retaliation. Shapir adds that if the US decides to attack Iranian nuclear installations it will do the following – according to the information leaked from the US plan – in order to deter Iran.

1. Attacking the Iranian navy and its bases, and all Iran's warfare capabilities able to be used to close the Straits of Hormuz;
2. Striking Iran's air defense systems as well as its command and control facilities;
3. Striking the Iranian air force and missile bases, particularly long-range missiles;
4. Striking nuclear facilities.<sup>11</sup>

### Israel and nuclear Iran

In the midst of the ongoing discussion and debate in Israel about the Iranian nuclear issue, several Israeli experts have published articles and studies that concluded that Iran will eventually achieve nuclear capability, despite all difficulties. They have demanded that the Israeli leadership draw up a policy to respond to a nuclear Iran. An expert in security affairs, Reuven Pedatzur, published an article in which he stated that if America did not attack Iran's nuclear facilities, it would not be long before Iran developed a nuclear weapon. Pedatzur rules out an American attack against Iranian nuclear facilities and called for Israeli decision makers to proceed in drawing up an Israeli policy that could respond to a nuclear Iran, "instead of engaging in the preparation of plans for military action which has very limited scope for success in preventing the development by Iran of nuclear weapons capabilities." Pedatzur added: "a nuclear weapon in the hands of Tehran does not mean the end of the world. Appropriate preparation and sound and wise policy are the guarantee to deter Iran's rulers."<sup>12</sup>

Ephraim Asculai, a 40-year veteran of the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission (IAEC) who now works as a senior researcher in the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), and is one of the most important Israeli experts concerned with the question of Iran's nuclear capability, published an article pointing out that Iran has actually been capable – in terms of the amount of material needed and technological capability – since mid-2011 of assembling one or two nuclear warheads within one year, if the Iranian political leadership issues an order to do so. Asculai further doubts the ability of any Israeli military strike to put an end to the Iranian nuclear program, or even to significantly hinder it. Asculai further adds that only the United States or "a coalition of countries similar to NATO could achieve the strategic aim through a military strike.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Reuven Pedatzur, "Confront the atom without an attack," *Haaretz*, November 13, 2011 <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/article-print-page/1.1564795>

At the present time, there seems to be a general agreement to avoid such an attack, which leaves us with the alternative of learning to live with the Iranian threat.”<sup>13</sup> Asculai concluded that Israel should prepare for this and form a policy that can respond to living with a nuclear Iran.

Asculai’s colleague at the INSS, Ephraim Kam, wrote a book<sup>14</sup> in 2007, in which he called for the formation of an Israeli policy to respond to the possibility of Iran becoming a nuclear state if all attempts to prevent it from developing a nuclear weapon fail; a policy that is based on the following:

1. Enhancing Israeli deterrence capabilities, including the elements which would likely be involved in a second Israeli “nuclear strike-capacity”;
2. Concluding a Joint Defense Treaty with the United States;
3. Israel joining NATO;
4. Reviewing Israel’s nuclear policy of ambiguity and, therefore fully disclosing—after consultations with the United States—the extent of Israeli nuclear capabilities;
5. Establishing direct or indirect channels of communication with Iran after it becomes a nuclear state, in order to achieve an understanding on a nuclear policy and clarify “red lines” not to be crossed.

### **Netanyahu, Barak and the decision to strike**

Netanyahu and Barak face serious opposition in Israel toward their policy to strike Iran’s nuclear facilities at the present time. At the moment, Israeli military and security establishment, the leadership of Kadima Party, the Labor Party, and a significant part of the Likud Party leadership are all against an Israeli military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities at the present time.

According to its laws, Israel cannot launch a war or a major military operation which leads to a war, without the government’s approval. Up to the present time, Netanyahu and Barak do not have a majority either in the ‘inner cabinet of eight’ or the government, to launch a strike against Iran. Netanyahu and Barak need to make a great and diverse effort, including changing the positions of the Israeli military and security establishments, and the American administration, neutralizing, or mitigating it, in order to be able to pass their own resolutions through government. However, this seems elusive at this stage.

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<sup>13</sup> Ephraim Asculai, *Coping With Iran’s Nuclear Capabilities*, Strategic Assessment, Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, Volume 14, Number 3, October 2011. See also the study of Adam Raz, *The Value of Nuclear Ambiguity in the Face of a Nuclear Iran*, Strategic Assessment, Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, Volume 14, Number 3, October 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Ephraim Kam, *A Nuclear Iran*, *op.cit.*

## Conclusion

This is not the first time Israel has put the issue of the Iranian nuclear threat to the top of its agenda and made it the main subject on the agenda of the international community by threatening to launch a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. Its objectives behind making this threat during at this time are:

**First** – to exert pressure on major countries in the world to impose harsh international economic sanctions against Iran. Israel continuously pushes for the imposition of UN economic sanctions on Iran's central bank and a complete boycott of it, as well as boycotting the Iranian oil and gas sectors which are vital to the Iranian economy.

**Second** – to prepare the political elite and international public opinion, to accept the idea of a joint Israeli and US military attack on Iranian nuclear facilities.

**Thirdly** – to reach an understanding with the US administration on the red lines that the Iranian nuclear program should not cross, and get clear assurances from the US on its commitment to a direct US military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities, if the Iranian nuclear program crosses these red lines and gets close to manufacturing a nuclear bomb.

In addition, Israel is at the same time, in cooperation with several Western intelligence services, working to obstruct the Iranian nuclear program and hamper it through secret, intensive, and multifaceted activities and methods (this is what Meir Dagan and leaders of the security institution have called for). These include cyberspace war, espionage and sabotage operations against Iran's nuclear facilities and the various facilities linked to them, and the assassination of Iranian scientists linked to the Iranian nuclear program.