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Don't be misled by how little was said about Iran in the major speeches recently delivered by President Barack Obama at Cairo University and Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu at Bar-Ilan University. And don't suppose, either, that the popular upheaval precipitated by Iran's rigged presidential election, assuming it falls short of ending the mullahs' 30-year tyranny, will fundamentally alter regional politics. The central question for Middle East politics is still what to do about Iran's illegal pursuit of nuclear weapons.

Nor is this a regional matter only. Iran's determination to acquire nuclear weapons, the better to spread Islamic revolution, affects the vital national security interests not only of Israel, Arab states in and beyond the Gulf, and Turkey, but also of the United States, Europe, Russia, and indeed countries around the world that depend on stability in the international political and economic order, which is to say virtually all.

In his address to the Muslim world, President Obama identified six sources of tension between the United States and Islam. Number three was "our shared interest in the rights and responsibilities of nations on nuclear weapons." On the campaign trail and in the presidential debates, Obama unequivocally opposed Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. But in Cairo in late May, on his carefully constructed global stage, Obama hedged.

On the one hand, he maintained that it was crucial to begin talks with Iran without preconditions because of the importance of "preventing a nuclear arms race in the Middle East that could lead this region and the world down a hugely dangerous path." He "strongly reaffirmed America's commitment to seek a world in which no nations hold nuclear weapons." And he expressed the hope that nations that were pursuing their "right to access to peaceful nuclear power" would not abuse it by violating their "responsibilities under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty." On the other hand, and watering down candidate Obama's promise to "keep the threat of military action on the table to defend our security and our ally Israel," he opined that "no single nation should pick and choose which nations hold nuclear weapons." And he offered no reason to believe that the United States had any levers at its disposal other than talk to influence Iran's decision. All in all, it would have been hard to project to a rapt world greater equivocation concerning Iran's quest for nuclear weapons if the president had deliberately concentrated his vaunted rhetorical gifts on the task.

To be sure, in his own speech in mid-June, Prime Minister Netanyahu also trod lightly on the subject of Iran. But that was because he needed to respond to Obama's flawed Cairo statement that Israel's legitimacy flows from the suffering of the Jewish people in the

Holocaust and the president's erroneous suggestion that the key to peace in the Middle East is Israel's cessation of building in existing Israeli communities beyond the Green Line. Without mentioning the president or his speech, Netanyahu stressed that the Jewish people's historic connection to the land of Israel extends back 3,500 years. And by affirming that Palestinians should have a state of their own, Netanyahu took another step on the path he himself blazed in 1998 by signing the Wye Accords and turning over Hebron to the Palestinians, a path on which he was subsequently joined by Prime Ministers Sharon and Olmert and which has led significant segments of the Israeli right away from the commitment to ruling over the West Bank forever. The settlements certainly are an issue. But from Netanyahu's point of view--and that of a majority of Israelis--the chief obstacles to peace are Hamas's Iran-sponsored terrorism, Palestinian Authority political dysfunction, and the refusal of Arab rulers around the region to provide the Palestinians financial support and political leadership.

Though devoting only one paragraph to it at Bar-Ilan, Netanyahu declared that "the Iranian threat still is before us in full force." And he proclaimed that "the greatest danger to Israel, to the Middle East, and to all of humanity, is the encounter between extremist Islam and nuclear weapons." Although he did not elaborate Israel's plan of action, he said nothing to retreat from his well-known position that Iran must not be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons, stated that he had discussed Iran with Obama, would take it up the following week with Europeans, and had been "working tirelessly for many years to form an international front against Iran arming itself with nuclear armaments."

Meanwhile, for many onlookers in the United States and elsewhere, the popular uprising in Iran has encouraged the hope that internal reform might dispose of the menace posed by the mullahs. Unfortunately, as much as the leader of the Iranian opposition, former Prime Minister Mir-Hussein Mousavi, may have been radicalized by Tehran's election fraud, the people's protests, and the government's violent crackdown, and as much as these dramatic events may have opened up a rift not merely between the people and the regime but within the regime, Mousavi is still a child of the Islamic Revolution and a creature of the establishment and remains unlikely anytime soon to lead a revolutionary overthrow of either. Yet with thousands of centrifuges spinning away to produce highly enriched uranium, and, on an entirely separate track, its development of technology for the production of plutonium proceeding apace, Iran gets closer with every day to owning nuclear weapons.

Given the dangerousness of the neighborhood in which they live and the immediacy of the threat, it is no surprise that for Israelis Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons remains front and center. Ordinary citizens regard a nuclear-armed Iran as a game changer, the greatest threat they have ever faced. In previous decades, no matter how grim their circumstances, Israelis could console themselves that they had an ace in the hole. They counted on their sizable stockpile of nuclear weapons--never officially declared though never officially denied and not subject to the slightest doubt among Israelis--to create a line in the sand beyond which no enemy would dare venture. A nuclear Iran, they now reasonably fear, would nullify this

enormous technological advantage and would embolden Hezbollah, Hamas, and the array of other transnational Islamist terrorist networks beginning with the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Jihad that proliferate in the Middle East.

Conversations over the last few weeks with more than a dozen members of Israel's larger national security community--right and left, scholars and military men and women, some coming out of the army and others the air force, some with decades of experience in military intelligence and others in clandestine operations, some former Knesset members and others former, current, and soon-to-be advisers to prime ministers--suggest it is fair to conclude that the professionals agree with the public that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons is a game changer. Among them, there is a consensus that Israel has the technological capacity to undertake a military strike that would inflict heavy damage on Iran's nuclear program. Such a strike, they also believe, would involve unprecedented challenges and risks, including the likelihood of a significant military response by Iran and its allies. Accordingly, an urgent internal debate is well underway in Israel concerning the circumstances in which the country should strike, alternative options, and, in the event that Iran does acquire nuclear weapons, the structure of an effective containment regime.

Israel being Israel, for every three experts you talk to on any particular issue you will hear at least four aggressively argued opinions. Nevertheless, a fairly consistent picture emerges, if not of a single proper Iran policy, then of the constellation of factors that Israel must consider in forming one.

Most countries are reluctant to discuss the details of their offensive capabilities because they don't want to provide useful information to their enemies. Israel is no different. Nonetheless, the experts with whom I spoke were willing to discuss in broad outline Israel's capacity to destroy or substantially degrade Iran's nuclear facilities. All would be delighted to see engagement, diplomacy, or sanctions succeed. All emphasized that a military strike must be the last resort, chosen only after every other option has been fully exploited. All believe that a green light from the United States, or at least a yellow light, would be indispensable. And they seem convinced that Israel has good intelligence about vital Iranian targets and could, if necessary, with a combination of aircraft and ballistic missiles, bring enough firepower to bear to set the Iranian program back far enough to justify the substantial risks.

Certainly this is the view, in broad outline, of Isaac Ben-Israel, and he should know. After graduating from high school in 1967, he joined the Israeli Air Force and served for more than 35 years. Now a Tel Aviv University professor teaching strategic studies and the history and philosophy of science, Ben-Israel helped plan the attack in 1981 on Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor, rose to the rank of major general, holding positions as head of the operations research branch of the air force and as head of research and development in the Israel Defense Forces and the ministry of defense, and served in the Knesset as a member of the centrist Kadima party. He continues to advise defense industries in Israel and abroad about technological and strategic issues.

Ben-Israel went so far as to characterize as "very reasonable" Center for Strategic and International Studies scholars Abdullah Toukan and Anthony H. Cordesman's "Study on a Possible Israeli Strike on Iran's Nuclear Development Facilities" published in March. Relying on open source intelligence, Toukan and Cordesman analyze in formidable technical detail Iranian nuclear targets, Israeli mission capabilities, Iranian defenses, Israeli defenses, and the military and political consequences of an Israeli attack. They conclude that an Israeli strike force would involve about 80 F-15s and F-16s (almost a fifth of their fighter aircraft); all 9 Israeli aerial tankers to refuel the fighters on their way to and from Iran; a likely flight route north over the Mediterranean, then east along the Syria-Turkey border, crossing briefly over Iraq, before heading into Iran. The strike would probably concentrate on three "critical nodes in Iran's nuclear infrastructure": the Natanz uranium enrichment facility, the Esfahan nuclear research center and uranium conversion facility, and the Arak heavy water plant and future plutonium production reactors. The authors stress that the mission would be complex, high-risk, and without solid assurance of success.

Another possibility is that Israel could attack Natanz, Esfahan, and Arak with approximately 50 Jericho III land-based long range ballistic missiles. This option has received relatively little attention even though, as Toukan and Cordesman point out, it may be "much more feasible than using combat aircraft" and certainly poses less risk to Israeli pilots and hardware. Still another possibility for attacking Iranian nuclear targets, though not discussed by Toukan and Cordesman, is some combination of combat aircraft and Jericho III missiles.

Even on the heroic assumption that the attack went exactly as planned, Israelis evaded Iranian air defenses and kept their losses to a minimum, and Iran's nuclear program was set back substantially, Israel would face considerable costs, both military and political.

The military costs might be serious but would be manageable, Israeli experts believe. They envisage six possible responses to an Israeli attack.

First, Iran, lacking a capable air force, might launch Shahab-3 long range ballistic missiles at Israeli cities and probably at Dimona, Israel's nuclear facility in the Negev. Israeli experts are confident that their Arrow anti-ballistic missile defense system, which has performed superbly in tests, would destroy most incoming Iranian missiles. Those that got through would have no more explosive power than Iraq's 1991 Scud missiles, which killed only one Israeli and did little damage to infrastructure. Missiles tipped with biological or chemical weapons are a different story and would provoke a massive and remorseless Israeli response.

At the same time, it is by no means certain that Iran would launch a retaliatory missile strike. Some Israeli experts believe that Israel's capacity to attack decisively nonnuclear Iranian targets, including the power grid and oil refineries, might deter Iran.

Second, Iran might order Hezbollah into action. Since the 2006 Lebanon war, in which Israel killed one third of Hezbollah's fighters, that group has rearmed and upgraded. It has enlarged its arsenal of rockets and missiles from about 12,000 at the outset of hostilities in July 2006 (4,000 of which Hezbollah fired at Israel that summer) to roughly 40,000. In sufficient quantities, these can cause suffering in Israel. But in determining whether to attack, Hezbollah might take into account that Israel learned lessons from 2006 and that, in anticipation of another round of fighting, it has prepared to deliver a knockout blow.

Third, Iran might demand that Syria attack Israel. But given that Syria's conventional forces are no match for Israel's and that it did not respond militarily when Israel destroyed its partly constructed nuclear facility at Deir al-Zour in 2007, there is a good chance that Syria will decline to get involved.

Fourth, Iran might order terrorist cells around the world to attack synagogues, Israeli embassies, and similar targets. This would have the disadvantage for Iran of shifting the focus of international attention from Israel's preemptive air strike to Iran's criminality.

Fifth, Iran might attack American targets in Iraq and foment unrest among Iraqi Shia. This too might backfire, both because it would bring America into the fight and because the community of interests between Arab Iraqi Shia and Persian Iranian Shia is limited.

Sixth, Iran might attack Persian Gulf shipping. But the fragile Iranian economy is at least as reliant as that of any Gulf country on the free flow of oil. And American firepower would end Iran's ability to threaten shipping within days.

The political costs could prove greater for Israel. Whether an Israeli military attack failed or succeeded, and particularly if it succeeded, Iran and the forces of radical Islam around the world would vehemently argue that Israel's unprovoked aggression provided irrefutable proof that nuclear weapons are critical for Iran and for radical Islam, if only for purely defensive purposes. Europeans, moreover, would ramp up their condemnatory rhetoric, proclaiming Israel the paramount threat to international order and demanding that Israel, which took it upon itself to disarm Iran, itself submit to international inspections of its nuclear facilities.

Toukan and Cordesman stumble in asserting that Israel would pay a heavy cost among Arab states. It's true, as they write, that Arab states "will not condone any attack on Iran." Indeed, the Gulf Arabs would probably condemn Israel harshly. Egypt might mobilize troops and send some into the Sinai. And all Arab states would join the rest of the world in calling for the imposition of international sanctions. But that would be for popular consumption. Israeli experts are as convinced as they are of anything that behind closed doors, Sunni Arab rulers would breathe a huge sigh of relief at the destruction of what they regard as the principal strategic threat to their security, a nuclear armed Shiite Iran seeking hegemony in the Gulf and exporting Shiite-style Islamic revolution around the world.

Still, after the costs and benefits are weighed and the enigmas and imponderables are given their due, the Israeli experts come back to where they begin: Only after every other option has been exhausted should a military strike be launched. No one else went as far as former Mossad head Efraim Halevy, who warned that an Israeli attack would "change the whole configuration of the Middle East," producing "a chasm between Israel and the rest of the region" that would have "effects that would last 100 years." By far the dominant view in Israel is the view espoused by John McCain: The only thing worse than the consequences of an attack on Iranian nuclear facilities would be the consequences of a nuclear Iran.

Short of a full-scale military strike, Israel also has a clandestine option involving the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, sabotage of Iranian facilities, and targeted killings. Nor would this represent a new policy. As Ben-Israel, choosing his words carefully, pointed out, Israeli national security experts have been warning that Iran was 5 years away from producing a nuclear weapon for the last 20. Why do you suppose, he asked, it has taken Iran so long? After all, he observed, 60 years ago in the middle of World War II, it took the United States only a few years to produce the first atomic bomb, and no country that has set its mind to it has taken more than 5 to 10 years. Leaving me to draw the proper inference, Ben-Israel emphasized that clandestine operations can delay but will not destroy Iran's nuclear program. And the experts agree that time is running out: Absent dramatic action--by the United States, the international community, Israel, or some combination--Iran is on track to join the nuclear club sometime between 2011 and 2014.

For a variety of reasons--President Obama's attempt to engage Iran may prove futile, the international community may be unable to maintain effective sanctions, the mullahs may hang on to power, an Israeli attack might fail, Israel might elect not to attack Iran--Israelis are compelled to contemplate the structure of an effective containment regime. The challenges are immense. Realists argue that containment based upon the doctrine of mutual assured destruction worked for the 40-year Cold War and will work in the Middle East. But they overlook that in the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 it almost failed.

The realists also rely on a facile analogy. The distinctive variables that Iran and the Middle East add to the mix cast grave doubts on any easy application of Cold War logic. Iran speaks explicitly about wiping out Israel; the Soviet Union never so spoke about the United States. Iran is inspired by a religious faith that celebrates martyrdom and contemplates apocalypse; the Soviet Union was driven by a secular ideology that sought satisfaction in this world. And Iran has no dialogue with Israel; the Soviet Union maintained constant communication with the United States.

These complicating factors make it all the more imperative for Israel, if it wants to construct a successful containment regime, to convey to Iran that it has a devastating second strike capability and is prepared to use it. In addition, it would be useful from the Israeli point of

view if the United States were to make Iran understand that America would treat an attack on Israel as an attack on it. And it would provide greater assurance still if Russia were to deliver a similar message.

But because, as Ben-Israel observed, "a guarantee from another nation is not a reliable deterrence policy," the critical element in a successful containment regime would be Israel's own unambiguous and compelling promise of swift and devastating retaliation. The mullahs may reasonably think that if they detonate a bomb over Tel Aviv while possessing nuclear-tipped missiles that can reach London, the Americans might hesitate to attack Iran on Israel's behalf. Therefore, should Iran obtain the bomb, an effective Israeli deterrent, according to Ben-Israel, would require Israel to demonstrate publicly its ability to inflict catastrophic damage on Iran and at the same time remove any doubt about Israel's willingness, in the event of a first strike by Iran, to do so.

But deterring an attack by nuclear-tipped Iranian missiles is only the beginning of the challenges that a containment regime would face. What would be a proportional response if the Iranians or their Hezbollah fighters slipped a small boat within a mile of Haifa and detonated a small nuclear device killing 10,000 Israelis?

And how ought Israel respond to--and containment work against--the myriad other dangers spawned by a nuclear Iran? The moment that Iran announces its possession of nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and perhaps Kuwait, taking to heart Iran's declared hostility to Sunni Islam and determination to obtain hegemony in the Gulf, will go shopping for their own. Egypt and Turkey will not be far behind. As if a nuclear-armed Pakistan were not worry enough, the vulnerability of these regimes to overthrow by the forces of radical Islam heightens the possibility of the world's most dangerous weapons falling into the hands of many of the world's most dangerous actors.

Furthermore, once the Middle East went poly-nuclear, it would be only a matter of time until a suitcase nuclear bomb fell, leaked, or was placed into terrorists' hands. Even before that, radical Islamists throughout the Middle East--particularly Hezbollah and Hamas--would receive a tremendous psychological boost from a nuclear Iran and be emboldened by their patron's nuclear umbrella. A nuclear Iran would further undermine the chance for peace between Israel and the Palestinians and Israel and Syria by tempting waverers in the region, those who had begun to abandon the idea that Israel might someday disappear, to once again contemplate an Israel-free Middle East.

In sum, containment is a grim option. So is a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. And relying on prayer for Mousavi and the Iranian people to overthrow the mullahs is no option at all, at least not for the state of Israel, the front line in Islamic radicalism's war against the West. Thus, in the short time left before Israel is compelled by an Iran fast closing in on a nuclear capability to choose between two grim options, Israel's highest priority will be to

persuade an equivocating United States, a dithering Europe, and an obstructionist Russia that a nuclear Iran is not just an Israeli problem or a Middle Eastern problem but a problem for the United States and the world.

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