



WILL ISRAEL BLAST THE IRANIAN BOMB?

By Michael Karpin

The idea of nuclear weapons in the hands of a dangerous enemy like Iran is unacceptable to nearly all Israelis. There is no chance that Israel will reconcile itself to living with nuclear threats from the ayatollahs. If Iran continues on the path to atomic weaponry, is Israel capable of acting to eliminate that danger?

Israelis hope for a diplomatic solution leading to cancellation of the Iranian nuclear program. But what if negotiations fail? Israel would prefer American military intervention, yet the prevalent opinion among Israeli experts is that the U.S. would be very hesitant to use force against Iran. Meanwhile, political and military leaders in Israel have repeatedly declared that if and when Iran reaches the point of no return, Israel will not hesitate to take military action against their bomb-making capability.

Before a military operation could be launched against Iran, there must be sufficient intelligence. Western intelligence agencies, especially those of Israel and the U.S., have increased their efforts to gather information about Iran's nuclear activities, but this does not mean the results are good. Experience shows that locating nuclear activity carried out in secret is a complicated matter. Almost all the countries that have engaged in the development of nuclear capability managed to pull the wool over the eyes of intelligence agencies trying to track them. France, China, Israel, South Africa, India, Pakistan, and others surprised the world when they carried out test explosions.

Iran started importing advanced centrifuge parts in the mid '90s and used them to build an installation for producing enriched uranium. But it wasn't until 2003 that the world found out. Western agencies completely missed the nuclear smuggling network run by Abdul Qadeer Khan from Pakistan. They overlooked Libya's nuclear plans. Their assessments of Iraq's program turned out to be way off.

The U.S. operates spy satellites, planes, and drones over Iran, and also sends in agents from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Israel also has two spy satellites, and according to non-Israeli sources, Israel uses the Kurdish territory in northern Iraq to put agents into Iran to gather data. It can be assumed that the two countries have accumulated some useful material on the defenses at known nuclear sites in Iran, especially the operational centrifuge installation at Natanz, and the reactor at Arak due to be completed in 2009 (and able to extract plutonium from spent uranium shortly thereafter).

It is doubtful that attacks on Natanz and Arak would eradicate Iran's nuclear plans. Learning from the bombing of Iraq's Osirak reactor by the Israeli air force in 1981, Iran has no doubt dispersed other subterranean uranium enrichment plants across the country. If one were hit, another could be activated. Iran is a large country with some rough terrain and remote regions where military and scientific activity can be easily concealed.

Israel is unlikely to ask the U.S. to approve any attack on Iran, unless its planes have to fly over Iraq while U.S. forces are still there. There is a shared apparatus for discussion on the way in which Israel may respond to the threat of weapons of mass destruction. On April 14, 2004, George Bush and Ariel Sharon exchanged letters on this subject. Sharon released a section of one American statement which declared that, "Israel has the right to defend itself with its own forces." This was understood as a direct message to Tehran that the U.S. accepts Israel's right to use its defensive capacity against Iranian development of nuclear weaponry.

The destruction of Iraq's reactor in 1981 was a historical precedent: For the first time, a regional power went on the offensive to prevent a dangerous neighbor from creating nuclear weapons. For the seven years prior to the attack, Israel had tried in various ways to stop Iraq from acquiring the installations and materials needed to build a bomb. Immediately after the attack,

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prime minister Menachem Begin declared that “Israel will not tolerate any nuclear weapons in the region.”

THE MOSSAD IN OVERDRIVE

If Israel launches an operation aimed at destroying the Iranian nuclear program, the man in charge of preparing it will be the head of the Mossad, Major General Meir Dagan, who was given this responsibility in November 2003. A military hero and political right-winger, Dagan is a natural leader and cunning thinker. Several defense experts use the word “creative” to describe Dagan’s ideas. Others call them “delusional.” A current Mossad operative says Dagan is one of the most resolute people he has ever known. “Once given a mission, he is simply unstoppable,” agrees Major General Amram Mitzna.

A short man whose stomach goes before him, Dagan is certainly no James Bond. He is more reminiscent of George Smiley, John LeCarre’s anti-hero. Dagan took over the Mossad after a series of highly publicized failures, when its morale was at one of its lowest ebbs. The worst blunder took place in Amman, Jordan, in 1997, when an attempt to assassinate the political chief of Hamas, Khaled Meshal, went badly wrong.

The Mossad also made errors gathering information on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Libya, and Iran. The failure to identify Libya’s nuclear program was described by the chairman of the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee as “one of the gravest failures of Israeli intelligence.” Like the CIA, the Mossad invested a great deal of effort, money, and manpower in gathering information on Iraq, yet in the end Israel didn’t have the slightest idea whether Saddam Hussein’s forces had nonconventional capabilities.

Under Dagan, the Mossad has taken on a different form, zeroing in on the war on terror and Iran’s nuclear plans, which Dagan has described as “the gravest existential threat to Israel since the founding of the state.” Before Dagan, the Mossad’s function was to gather information of all kinds from all over the world, be it security-related, military, political, economic, or industrial. Dagan narrowed the focus.

Dagan has stressed the operational side over research, and channeled most resources to special operations that could be activated anywhere on the globe. If an al-Qaeda base were discovered in East Asia where terrorists were developing a dirty bomb or chemical or biological materials, the Mossad would have elite units tasked to eliminate it. If the prime minister approved a pinpoint operation against some nuclear installation, Dagan said, the Mossad must have a unit trained to carry it out.

To prepare for its new missions, the Mossad has almost completely ceased dealing with classical intelligence evaluation since September 2003. Some 200 employees, mostly desk jockeys, were retired, and seven division heads were replaced. In 2004, the Mossad recruited three times as many field operatives

as in previous years. The pattern is reminiscent of the early days of the Mossad when it was licensed by Ben-Gurion to kidnap and assassinate enemies, or when Golda Meir ordered the organization to hunt down and kill the terrorists who murdered members of the Israeli Olympic team in 1972.

In recent appearances before the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, Dagan said an Iranian bomb would be a threat not only to Israel but to Europe too. Iran is developing missiles with ranges of up to 1,240 miles, and acquiring planes that could carry nuclear bombs long distances. In January 2005, he stated that Iran was “close to the point of no return.”

Dagan did not give details on the Mossad’s intelligence work in Iran, or on its operational plans. But Israeli spokesmen have hinted more than once that a military operation is being planned. “We do not only rely on others,” said Lieutenant General Moshe Ya’alon. “We’ll rely on others until we have to rely on ourselves,” elaborated Lieutenant General Dan Halutz. Speaking in his mother tongue of Persian during a broadcast to Iran, Israel’s minister of defense, Shaul Mofaz, explained that, “If there will be a need to destroy Iran’s nuclear capability, the necessary steps will not harm Iranian civilians.”

BUSTING BUNKERS

Israel’s options for military action are varied, and different units of air, naval, and land forces have trained to carry them out. A land operation would be very complex and dangerous; an air attack would be far less risky. It is doubtful Iran could stop bombers from reaching the critical facilities, which are around a thousand miles from Israel. The Israeli air force has F-15 aircraft with a range of 2,765 miles, and F-16s with enlarged fuel tanks that can fly 1,300 miles.

Ordnance capable of penetrating deep into the earth would be required to destroy hidden facilities, like the kind the U.S. used to bomb the caves at Tora Bora in Afghanistan. In September 2004, it was reported that the United States was about to sell Israel 500 of these one-ton “bunker busters” that can penetrate 30 feet of earth or concrete. “This is not the sort of ordnance needed for the Palestinian front. Bunker busters could serve Israel against Iran, or possibly Syria,” an unnamed Israeli official told Reuters.

It is doubtful that Iran has the ability to respond directly to an Israeli attack. Tehran would probably activate Hezbollah forces in southern Lebanon with batteries of short-range missiles and rockets, which could severely disrupt life in northern Israel. Iran could also get Palestinian militia fighters to carry out terror attacks in Israel. From Israel’s point of view, though, neither of these threats would be existential. An Iranian bomb, however, would be.

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