

The alternative to an Israeli attack on Iran

Serious diplomacy, not military action, will bring regional security.

By Shlomo Ben-Ami and Trita Parsi

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Washington and Jerusalem

Is war between Israel and Iran inevitable? To listen to Iran's radical President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, or Israel's Iranian-born transportation minister Shaul Mofaz, or even recent reports that Israel carried out a major military training mission over the Mediterranean to rehearse an attack on Iran, you might be left with that impression.

Mr. Mofaz's comments last month indicating he would attack Iran didn't help perceptions either. The immediate effect of his statement was a record increase in oil prices – giving Mofaz's Iranian nemeses a windfall of several million dollars.

Mofaz and Mr. Ahmadinejad are wrong. Israel and Iran are not destined to be enemies, nor does the military option present a real way out of the current impasse. In reality, it doesn't offer a solution at all.

Logistical challenges of hitting Iran's nuclear facilities and regional consequences of war aside, military strikes wouldn't destroy any potential clandestine facilities in Iran nor Iran's knowledge of the enrichment process.

Even the most successful bombing raid would leave Iran with some nuclear capability. At best, proponents of this option admit, bombing would set back the program five years. During that time the expectation is that the Iranian people miraculously would unseat the country's ruling clergy and dismantle the nuclear program permanently.

This unjustified expectation underlines a central flaw in the outlook of both Jerusalem and Washington: the tendency to treat the risks and repercussions of military operations with extreme optimism, while treating the diplomacy challenges with extreme skepticism.

A much more probable scenario: Tehran would use the attack to invoke Article 10 of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and withdraw from the treaty altogether. This article gives each party the right to withdraw if it decides that extraordinary events "have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country." Iran would cease all cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency, expel all UN inspectors, and by that, deprive the international community of much-needed transparency and insight.

More ominously, the attack could prompt the Iranian leadership to make the crucial decision to seek an actual nuclear bomb and not just the capability to build one, while accentuating Iran's role as a power against the status quo.

Consequently, a successful bombing campaign by either the US or Israel would simply guarantee a nuclear armed and vengeful Iran five years down the road. Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the IAEA, said recently that if Iran left the NPT, it could build a nuclear weapon within a year.

To make matters worse, any military attack would reduce rather than increase the likelihood of a democratic takeover. As unpopular as the Iranian government is, the expectation that a secular democratic government would emerge in the aftermath of a bombing campaign is wildly optimistic and reminiscent of the Bush administration's miscalculations going into Iraq. War with Iran would be the death knell and not the savior of the Iranian democracy movement.

Any serious effort to address the Iranian challenge must recognize the true nature of the conflict. There is nothing apocalyptic about the nuclear stand-off or the Israeli-Iranian rivalry. Rather, these are strategically driven conflicts that can be managed and even resolved through the appropriate level of diplomacy.

A give and take is needed between Iran and Israel in which Iran must end its support for violent groups and acknowledge Israel's legitimate security concerns. Israel and the US must accommodate an Iranian role commensurate with its geopolitical weight and use Iran's inclusion into regional political and economic structures to tame Iran's revolutionary impulses.

That said, Israeli-Iranian enmity is not entirely dissociated from the Arab-Israeli dispute. The latter definitely facilitates and enhances Iran's strategy of regional destabilization. A regional system of security and cooperation in the Middle East cannot be established without an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict. And it is equally important to address the question of nuclear disarmament.

For regional security to be possible it is not only necessary for Iran, Israel, and the US to grant one another minimum levels of recognition, it would also be necessary that Israel discard the notion that the regional order should be based on its nuclear monopoly.

The real choice in the long run is not between suspension of enrichment or war – it is between a verifiably nuclear-free Middle East or uncontrolled proliferation.

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