

## *COMMENTARY*

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### **Israel's Posturing: Behind Netanyahu-Barak Threats to Attack Iran**

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Successive Israeli governments have consistently inhibited in the past any public discussion about Iran's nuclear programme and what Israel might do to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. In recent weeks however, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Ehud Barak have been openly discussing the issue while intimating their readiness to take whatever actions necessary to eliminate the Iranian threat. The question is why Netanyahu and Barak have chosen to "advertise" their deep concerns now and why they have such an urgency to act at this particular juncture, both of which have prompted newspapers reporters and pundits to speculate about what the real intentions are behind this public exposure and what is to be expected. Meanwhile, former and current officials, including President Shimon Peres, have expressed pointed objections to taking any unilateral military strikes against Iran, insisting that if such action became necessary, it must certainly be led by the US to shield Israel from being singled out and blamed for the potentially disastrous regional consequences.

Having concluded that sanctions and diplomacy have failed as Iran is either technologically nearing the point of no return or achieving a zone of immunity that will make their most advanced nuclear plants at Fordo (near Qom) impregnable to air attack, the Netanyahu government has decided on a new strategy designed to achieve multiple purposes. While Israel's determination to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons has not changed, the new strategy is meant to strongly convey that Israel is not bluffing. Israel's groundwork for the new strategy is as follows: Israel will alert its closest ally, the US, alarm its European friends, credibly threaten Iran and gather more information, warn other enemies such as Hezbollah and Hamas, test the private sentiments and public reactions of the Sunni Arab states, and will finally prepare the Israeli public while laying in wait for the right moment to strike, should everything else fail.

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The Netanyahu government has already expressed its displeasure with the strategy the Obama administration has adopted to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. Whereas many Israelis believe that President Barack Obama's credibility is on the line and he will act militarily should it become necessary, others, including Netanyahu and Barak, are not so sure. They are concerned that Obama may eventually have to choose between preventing or containing Iran and will settle on the latter by providing Israel and other Arab allies in the region with some kind of security umbrella.

Netanyahu and Barak are troubled by the fact that Obama has relied excessively on a diplomatic solution knowing full well that the Iranians are masters of playing for time. Moreover, he chose to impose gradual sanctions to which the Iranian government was able to adjust instead of inflicting real, crippling sanctions, especially after the failure of the first few sets of negotiations, which could have forced Tehran to change course. This approach, from the Israeli perspective, played into Iran's hand while engaging the P5+1 (the US, the United Kingdom, France, Russia and China plus Germany) in futile negotiations that have never stood a chance of success.

By asking the P5+1 to declare that the talks with Iran have failed, Netanyahu is alerting the US that time is of the essence and challenging Obama to take more decisive actions against Iran. Netanyahu's rationale is that since Obama seeks to prevent an Israeli attack in an election year, he will be under immense pressure from his presidential rival, Mitt Romney, not only to adopt a final set of truly crippling sanctions but to be clear about his willingness to use force against Iran before it reaches the point of no return or enters the zone of immunity.

Netanyahu's message of alarm is directed against the EU, Turkey and China, which will be the most affected by the potential disruption of oil supplies should the Strait of Hormuz become imperilled. Netanyahu and Barak are convinced that the EU in particular is engaged in wishful thinking, believing that continuing diplomatic efforts coupled with stiffer sanctions will force the ayatollahs to come to their senses. The EU clearly view Netanyahu as overzealous about Israel's national security, are extremely worried about an Israeli attack and are convinced that the repercussions will be catastrophic. Thus, for them no attack should be contemplated as long as Iran is willing to continue to talk.

Using the repeated Iranian existential threat against Israel, and while observing the Western powers' ineptitude in the past in dealing with the genocide in Bosnia, Sudan and now the wholesale slaughter in Syria, Netanyahu has little faith in what the EU can, or will, do to bring Iran to a halt. The EU, from Netanyahu's perspective, could have done a great deal more to cripple Iran economically but it still has yet to do so. At the same time, the EU refuses to declare Hezbollah, Iran's prime surrogate but Israel's staunchest enemy, as a terrorist organization while it continues to allow Hezbollah to freely raise tens of millions of dollars in Europe, when much of it is used for buying armaments to target Israel.

The direct threat against Iran is based on Netanyahu and Barak's calculation that although public discussion about the potential attack on Iran provides Tehran more time to prepare for the worst, it will provide Israel with certain advantages. Fear of an imminent Israeli attack will force the Iranian authorities to take additional security measures to protect their nuclear facilities, which will reveal Iran's preparedness and capabilities, and expose its weaknesses and how much of its boastings of a damaging counter-attack against Israel are in fact accurate. Importantly, Israel will also be in a position to better assess the Iranian public's reaction and whether the rumours of an imminent attack will precipitate panic, which may reveal how the Iranian authorities react and pacify the public. More than anything, Israel wants Iran to take its threats seriously, which explains why Netanyahu and Barak openly stated that when it comes to Israel's national security Israel must, in the final analysis, rely only on itself.

The exposé is also intended to warn all those who might think of coming to Iran's aid by engaging Israel on another front (in particular with groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas) that they should think twice before they dare to provoke Israel. By openly discussing their intentions, Netanyahu and Barak want these groups or states to assume that Israel would not have discussed such a sensitive national security matter had it not taken into full consideration their potential involvements. The message to Hezbollah is clear: there will not be a repeat of the 2006 war, Israel will break its back and that this time around no one will come to its aid considering Syria is in shambles and Iran is under intense economic pressure and too busy to deal with the potentially catastrophic effects of an Israeli attack.

The other target of Israel's open discourse on attacking Iran is intended to test the Sunni Arabs, especially the Gulf States led by Saudi Arabia. There have been ongoing tacit discussions between Israel and the Gulf States about the potential Israeli strike and how that might affect both their public reactions and their private interests and concerns. There is no doubt that all Sunni Arab states would prefer to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons peacefully. But after failing to do so by diplomatic means, they would support an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, whether the attack is carried out by Israel, the US or through a joint effort. Saudi Arabia in particular sees the conflict between Shiites versus Sunnis in terms of regional domination with a focus on the Gulf and views Iran with nuclear weapons as a nightmarish scenario that must be prevented at all costs.

Finally, Netanyahu's and Barak's message was intended for the Israeli public not only to prepare them for a potential Iranian counter-attack but to begin psychological and logistical preparations (including the distributions of gas masks, stocking underground shelters with food and water) to avoid public panic and rally the nation around the government's prospective actions. Although the Netanyahu government is not dismissive of the voices of the Israelis who consider a unilateral attack as ill-conceived and extremely risky, Netanyahu and Barak want to demonstrate unshakable resolve in the face of an existential threat and that the public can ultimately trust their

judgment. Moreover, such an exercise, even if a strike is avoided either because of the United States or because of Netanyahu's/Barak's readiness to act, will be good for Israel and good for the entire region as long as Iran never acquires nuclear weapons.

Israel has time and again stated in the past that it will not allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons or the technology to quickly assemble such arsenals. Some Israelis insist that whatever repercussions arise from attacking Iran's nuclear facilities will be far less ominous than allowing Iran to obtain nuclear capabilities, which will have far more reaching geopolitical and security implications that will adversely affect every state in the region.

In the final analysis, an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear facilities may not come as soon as many predict. The strike can and may well happen but it is very unlikely that such an incredibly ominous undertaking will occur without a minimum of US acquiescence, if not outright support and direct involvement. Regardless of how much Netanyahu and Barak may be sure of themselves and Israel's military capabilities, they cannot afford to make any mistakes or miscalculations because Israel's future is on the line.

Yet, exactly because of that, no one should think for a moment that Israel is bluffing. Netanyahu and Barak have concluded that diplomacy has run its course and only extraordinary, crippling and immediate sanctions may still have a slim chance of success. Once Israel determines that Iran has either achieved the point of no return or is about to reach the zone of immunity and the US is not prepared to take military action, Israel will attack Iran singlehandedly and no consequences of such an attack, from the Israeli perspective, will fare against such an existential threat.

**Note:** This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal. Link: [http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/israels-posturing-behind-netanyahu-and-baraks-threats-to-attack-iran/?utm\\_source=Subscribers&utm\\_campaign=66b644e3ec-UA-5963141-2&utm\\_medium=email](http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/israels-posturing-behind-netanyahu-and-baraks-threats-to-attack-iran/?utm_source=Subscribers&utm_campaign=66b644e3ec-UA-5963141-2&utm_medium=email)

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