Israel: Possible Military Strike Against Iran’s Nuclear Facilities

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Potential Factors in an Israeli Decision: Estimated Effects of a Possible Strike

Effect on Iran’s Nuclear Program

Another major consideration for Israeli decisionmakers is the ultimate impact of an Israeli military strike on Iran’s existing nuclear program. Israeli officials and analysts generally agree that a strike would not completely destroy the program. One journalist has said, “According to the Israeli assessment, a successful strike, a strike that would be conducted according to planning, would … inflict a significant damage that would end with a delay of three to five years.” In February 2012, a senior Israeli official was cited in Time magazine as saying that “given the wide geographic dispersion of Iran’s atomic facilities, combined with the limits of Israel’s air armada, the Jewish state can expect to push back the Iranian program by only a matter of months—a year at most, according to the official. He attributes that estimate to the Israel Atomic Energy Commission, which is charged with assessing the likely effect of a strike.” In March 2012, however, another source cited optimism among some Israeli national security officials that a strike in “the next six months—conducted before Iran can further harden its nuclear sites, or make them redundant—will set back the ayatollahs’ atomic ambitions at least five years.”

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204 Prepared by Jim Zanotti, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs, with contributions from Paul K. Kerr, Analyst in Nonproliferation.
206 Vick, op. cit.
estimates of how much time the Iranian program might be set back as a result of a strike, Israeli officials and analysts have generally not focused in open sources on technical details that might provide hints about potential Israeli attack plans and how they might factor into Israeli decisionmaking. According to one Israeli analysis from January 2012:

the censor’s office is charged with preventing publication of secrets that may harm state security…. A public discussion ought not to deal with the operational issues connected to a military action, lest operational plans, Iranian vulnerabilities, and limitations of Israeli capabilities are exposed. In addition, the public does not have the necessary information for a discussion of this sort, such as detailed intelligence on the Iranian nuclear program and information on the IDF’s operational capabilities that are relevant to such an action.208

Public discussion of this issue in the United States may give some hint as to the considerations Israeli leaders are addressing. Many officials and analysts in the United States have argued that, following a military attack that destroyed most of Iran’s major nuclear facilities, Iran would be able to reconstitute the program.209 General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in his February 19 CNN interview, said:

I think that Israel has the capability to strike Iran and to delay the production or the capability of Iran to achieve a nuclear weapons status, probably for a couple of years. But some of the targets are probably beyond their reach and, of course, that’s what—that’s what concerns them. That’s this notion of a zone of immunity that they discuss.210

According to a February 13, 2012, CRS telephone interview with a U.S. executive branch official, an attack that left Iran’s conversion and centrifuge production facilities intact would considerably reduce the timeline for reconstitution. This timeline would possibly also be affected by variables such as the number of centrifuges and quantity of LEU and 20%-enriched uranium remaining usable after an attack. Director of National Intelligence Clapper, in February 16, 2012, testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, said that the intelligence community does not have a “single number” for the amount of time necessary for Iran to reconstitute its program, explaining that the number of relevant variables precludes formulating such an assessment. Reconstitution of a program aimed at developing a full nuclear weapons capability would depend not only on Iran’s ability to produce fissile nuclear material for a weapon, but also research, development, and production relating to the creation of both functional warheads and delivery systems such as missiles.

209 Kahl, “Not Time to Attack Iran…,” op. cit. See also Vick, op. cit.
210 General Dempsey transcript, op. cit.
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Other Facilities Related to Iran’s Nuclear Program

Iran’s facilities for producing centrifuges and components would probably be important to Tehran’s ability to reconstitute its nuclear program after a military attack. Iran might have facilities that are unknown to Israel. IAEA inspectors had access to Iranian centrifuge workshops in order to verify an October 2003 agreement under which Iran suspended its enrichment program. However, the agency’s knowledge of Iran’s workshops has deteriorated since Iran ended this access in early 2006. Several months later, Wayne White, a former top Middle East intelligence analyst at the Department of State, expressed concern that Tehran could be moving some components related to its nuclear program.212

More recently, a U.S. official told CRS in an April 2011 in-person interview that there “could be lots of workshops” in Iran. A former U.S. government official with direct experience on the issue told CRS via telephone on February 27, 2012, that Iran’s centrifuge production is widely distributed and that the number of workshops has probably multiplied “many times” since 2005 because of an increase in Iranian contractors and subcontractors working on the program. Perhaps referring to Iranian centrifuge workshops, former Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Agency Director Michael Hayden stated in January 2012 that neither the United States nor Israel knows the location of all key Iranian nuclear-related facilities.213

An executive branch official said in a February 27, 2012, CRS telephone interview that Iran does not have sufficient spare centrifuges or components that would enable it to install new centrifuges immediately after an attack. However, the former official interviewed on February 27 added that most centrifuge workshops could probably be rebuilt or replicated within six months.

Perhaps anticipating that a military strike might not permanently set back Iran’s nuclear program, some Israeli officials reportedly acknowledge that Israel may feel compelled to mount periodic follow-up attacks214 that, in the words of one U.S. analyst, could seek to “demoralize the industry’s workforce, disrupt its operations, and greatly increase the costs of the program. Israeli leaders might hope that their attrition tactics, delivered through occasional air strikes, would bog down the nuclear program while international sanctions weaken the civilian economy and reduce political support for the regime.”215 Amos Yadlin, the former head of Israel’s military intelligence unit and one of the IAF pilots who carried out the 1981 Osirak strike, wrote in March 2012 that Iran might not fully resume its nuclear program if “military action is followed by tough sanctions, stricter international inspections and an embargo on the sale of nuclear components to Tehran.”216 In contrast, a Israeli analyst wrote in January 2012, “If Israel attacks Iran now, does that mean Iran would never get nuclear weapons? No, it would merely postpone that outcome for at most a year or two more than it would take otherwise. And then it would ensure an all-out, endless bloody war thereafter.”217 Former IAF commander Eitan Ben-Eliyahu, who flew in escort of the 1981 Osirak bombing mission, was cited by the Jerusalem Report in March 2012 as having the view that “the ultimate success of any military operation in Iran—no matter who carries it out—will depend to a large extent on the follow-up diplomatic activity.”218

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214 Allin and Simon, op. cit., p. 53; Pfeffer, “Will They?”, op. cit.
217 Rubin, op. cit.
218 Susser, op. cit.
Effect on Iran’s Regime\(^{219}\)

How the Israelis assess the effect of an air strike on the popularity and durability of Iran’s regime is unclear, as is whether this is even a major factor in their decisionmaking process. In U.S.-Israel government discussions, U.S. officials reportedly have cited analyses indicating that military action against Iran’s nuclear program—particularly if carried out by Israel—might heal increasingly evident rifts within Iranian society and government. U.S. officials assess that divisions are widening among Iranian elites and that Iran’s economy is “weighed down by international sanctions,” but they are apparently not convinced that these divisions jeopardize the regime.\(^{220}\) Nevertheless, trends observed over several years—and heightened by a broad uprising in Iran in 2009 over the results of June 12, 2009, presidential elections—suggest that the regime’s grip on power might be weakening. U.S. policymakers apparently do not want U.S. allies to undertake any policies that might undermine the perceived deterioration in the regime’s position. Secretary of Defense Panetta, at a December 2, 2011, Brookings Institution event, stated that one of the unintended consequences of a military strike on Iran’s nuclear program would be that “the regime that is weak now … would suddenly be able to reestablish itself, suddenly be able to get support in the region.”\(^{221}\) That view is shared by some Iranian opposition figures, including a U.S.-based opposition figure who visited Israel in January 2012 and expressed on Israeli television the view that an Israeli air strike on Iran would increase the regime’s domestic popularity.\(^{222}\)

Although Israeli leaders do not generally speak publicly about the potential effect of an Israeli strike on the Iranian regime, Prime Minister Netanyahu reportedly “has told visitors [to his office] that he believes the Tehran government to be deeply unpopular, indeed despised, and that a careful attack on its nuclear facilities might even be welcomed by Iranian citizens.”\(^{223}\) Even if the current Iranian regime were to fall, there is no guarantee that a successor regime would be less disposed to pursuing a program that could give Iran a nuclear weapons capability. Therefore, Israeli leaders may not be particularly concerned about incurring the cost of preserving an Iranian regime that might otherwise have collapsed were there no strike. However, according to Israeli analysts who have summarized the Israeli debate over a possible military strike on Iran, regime change “is regarded by some opponents of a strike as possible, given the degree of discontent prevailing in Iran, especially among its large minorities—and as the only long-term way of rendering Iran’s nuclear program less dangerous.”\(^{224}\)

\(^{219}\) Prepared by Kenneth Katzman, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs.

\(^{220}\) Testimony of Director of National Intelligence James Clapper before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, January 31, 2012.


\(^{222}\) Joshua Mitnick, “Israeli defense minister implies a strike on Iran nuclear program is near,” Christian Science Monitor, February 3, 2012. See also http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNWDhpOPYIY.

\(^{223}\) Bronner, “Israel Senses Bluffing in Iran’s Threats of Retaliation,” op. cit.