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*Center for Preventive Action*

*CONTINGENCY PLANNING MEMORANDUM NO. 5*

# An Israeli Strike on Iran

Steven Simon  
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## *INTRODUCTION*

Successive Israeli governments have held that a nuclear weapons capability in the region, other than Israel's own, would pose an intolerable threat to Israel's survival as a state and society. Iran's nuclear program—widely regarded as an effort to obtain a nuclear weapon, or put Tehran a “turn of a screw” away from it—has triggered serious concern in Israel. Within the coming year, the Israeli government could decide, much as it did twenty-eight years ago with respect to Iraq and two years ago with respect to Syria, to attack Iran's nuclear installations in order to delay its acquisition of a weapons capability.

While U.S. officials—including the president—have declared a nuclear armed Iran to be “unacceptable,” the administration has been clear in wanting to prevent such an outcome through peaceful diplomatic means. Without forswearing the eventual use of military force, senior U.S. officials have also indicated that a preventive strike on Iran by Israel would be “ill advised,” “very destabilizing,” and “likely very bad,” and thus not in the U.S. interest. These concerns have evidently been transmitted privately to the Israeli government.

This contingency planning memo assesses the likelihood of an Israeli strike against Iran despite U.S. objections, the implications for the United States should it take place, the policy options available to reduce the chances of its occurrence, and the measures that could be taken to mitigate the potentially negative consequences.

## *THE CONTINGENCY*

An Israeli attack would likely concentrate on three locations: Isfahan, where Iran produces uranium hexafluoride gas; Natanz, where the gas is enriched in approximately half of the eight thousand centrifuges located there; and Arak, where a heavy water research reactor, scheduled to come on line in 2012, would be ideal to produce weapons-grade plutonium. It is conceivable that Israel may attack other sites that it suspects to be part of a nuclear weapons program if targeting data were available, such as the recently disclosed Qom site, whose location is known, or centrifuge fabrication sites, the location(s) of which have not yet been identified. The latter would be compelling targets since their destruction would hobble Iran's ability to reconstitute its program. But attacks against the sites at Natanz, Isfahan, and Arak alone would likely stretch Israel's capabilities, and planners would probably be reluctant to enlarge the raid further.

Israel is capable of carrying out these attacks unilaterally. Its F-16 and F-15 aircraft, equipped with conformal fuel tanks and refueled with 707-based and KC-130 tankers toward the beginning and end of their flight profiles, have the range to reach the target set, deliver their payloads in the face of Iranian air defenses, and return to their bases. The munitions necessary to penetrate the targets are currently in Israel's inventory in sufficient numbers; they include Bomb Live Unit (BLU)-109 and BLU 113 bombs that carry two thousand and five thousand pounds, respectively, of high-energy explosives. These GPS-guided weapons are extremely accurate and can be lofted from attacking aircraft fifteen kilometers from their target, thereby reducing the attackers' need to fly through air defenses. Israel also has a laser-guided version of these bombs that is more accurate than the GPS variant and could deploy a special-operations laser designation unit to illuminate aim points as it is reported to have done in the attack on the al-Kibar facility in Syria.

These munitions could be expected to damage the targets severely. Natanz is the only one of the three likely targets that is largely underground, sheltered by up to twenty-three meters of soil and concrete. BLU-type bombs, used in a “burrowing” mode, however, could penetrate deeply enough to fragment the inner surface of the ceiling structures above the highly fragile centrifuge arrays and even precipitate the collapse of the entire structure. Burrowing requires that attacking aircraft deliver their second and third bombs into the cavity created by the first. GPS-guided munitions are accurate enough to do this a little less than half of the time. The probability of successful burrowing increases with the number of shots. The use of three bombs per aim point would confer better than a 70 percent probability of success. (Laser-guided munitions are more capable of a successful burrow on the first try.) The uranium conversion facility in Isfahan and reactor at Arak are not buried and could be heavily damaged, or completely destroyed, relatively easily. This would be possible even if Iran managed to down a third of the Israeli strike package, a feat that would far exceed historical ratios of bomber losses by any country in any previous war.

These relatively upbeat ballistic assessments do not mean that the mission as a whole would be easy. On the contrary, a coordinated air attack would be complicated and highly risky. The three plausible routes to Iran involve overflight of third countries: the northern approach would likely follow the Syrian-Turkish border and risk violation of Turkey’s airspace; the central flight path would cross Jordan and Iraq; a southern route would transit the lower end of Jordan, Saudi Arabia and possibly Kuwait. All but two of these countries are to a greater or lesser degree hostile to Israel. The exceptions, Jordan and Turkey, would not wish their airspace to be used for an Israeli attack against Iran. Turkey recently canceled an annual trilateral exercise involving Israel, in part to signal its opposition to an Israeli strike. In any case, overflight would jeopardize Israeli diplomatic relations with both countries. With respect to Syria and Saudi Arabia, operational concerns would trump diplomatic ones. If either country detects Israeli aircraft and chooses to challenge the overflight using surface-to-air missiles or intercepting aircraft, Israel’s intricate attack plan, which would have a razor-thin margin for error to begin with, could well be derailed.

Overflight of Iraq, whose airspace is under de facto U.S. control, would also be diplomatically awkward for Israel and would risk a deadly clash with American air defenses since the intruding aircraft would not have the appropriate Identification, Friend, or Foe (IFF) codes. Israel would have to carefully weigh the operational risk and most of all the cost of a strike to its most vital bilateral relationship, especially if President Barack Obama had explicitly asked Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu not to order an attack.

The sheer distances involved pose a challenge, as well. The targets lie at the outermost 1,750-kilometer range limits of Israeli tactical aircraft. Diplomatic and military factors would confine Israeli refueling operations to international airspace where tankers could orbit safely for long periods. These locations, while usable, are suboptimal. They would yield the attackers little leeway to loiter in their target areas, or engage in the fuel-intensive maneuvering typical of dogfights and evasion of surface-to-air missiles. The limited number of tankers would limit the number of sorties.

A final consideration for Israeli planners would be the effect of explosives on the nuclear materials stored at the uranium conversion facility at Isfahan and the enrichment facility at Natanz. Both facilities are likely to possess uranium hexafluoride and Natanz produces low enriched uranium. Though these materials are not radioactive and do not pose radiological risks, the release of uranium into the environment would almost certainly raise public health concerns due to heavy metal contamination.

This combination of diplomatic and operational complexities would clearly give Israeli leaders pause. To act, they would have to perceive a grave threat to the state of Israel and no reliable alternative to eliminating that threat.

### *ASSESSING THE LIKELIHOOD OF AN ISRAELI ATTACK*

The likelihood of this contingency depends on Israeli assessments of U.S. and international resolve to block Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability; the state of the Iranian program; the amount of time a successful strike would buy to be worth the expected risks and costs, a point on which there is a spectrum of Israeli views, from six months to five years; whether Israel believes there is a clandestine Iranian program, which would lead some Israelis to conclude that an attack would not buy any time at all; and the effect of a strike on the U.S.-Israel relationship. Because none of these factors is constant, estimates about the likelihood of an Israeli strike within the coming year will vary. For example, Israel is probably somewhat less likely to attack now than it was before the Qom installation was disclosed, the P-3 took a firmer stance, and Russia appeared to concede that stronger sanctions had to be considered. If Iran were to agree to ship the bulk of its uranium to France and Russia for enrichment—a deal that has been agreed in working level negotiations but may never be consummated—Israel's incentive to accept the risks of an attack against Iran would probably diminish. Should diplomatic initiatives run aground, the likelihood of an Israeli attack could be expected to increase accordingly.

Probability assessments will vary based on other factors, as well. Iranian rhetoric that reinforces President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's themes of Holocaust denial and the inevitable disappearance of Israel only strengthen the hand of attack proponents within Israel by justifying fears about Iran's intentions, while lowering diplomatic barriers to an attack. Certain factors that will not be publicly apparent could play a role, such as developments regarding Israel's overflight options that reduce the risks inherent in the mission; the availability to Israel of new, more accurate targeting intelligence, especially relating to single points of failure, or other potentially catastrophic vulnerabilities in Iran's installations; and technical advances, particularly in air defense suppression, that reduce the risks in attempting penetration.

It is clear, however, that Israel sees the stakes as very high. Netanyahu's UN General Assembly speech emphasized the existential nature of the threat that he and others in the current government believe Iran represents. His emphasis on the Holocaust as a defining feature of Jewish history and his self-conception as the one who bears the burden of preventing yet another such disaster suggest that U.S. calculations of risk and benefit that tilt toward Israeli restraint might prove to be mirror-imaging of a particularly deceptive sort. Given Iran's supportive relationship with certain terrorist groups in the region, Israel also cannot ignore the risk that a nuclear device might be transferred to them in the future. The longer-term impact of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons on triggering further proliferation in the Middle East, not least among states hostile to Israel, will also enter into their strategic calculus.

Israeli officials are aware that no conceivable Israeli strike could completely eliminate the nuclear threat posed by Iran and that an attack might only intensify longer-term risks as Iran reconstituted covertly, advancing an argument long made by counterterrorism officials that any effort to counter Iran's nuclear challenge is going to be like "mowing the lawn." Just as the grass will grow again, so will the nuclear program; Israel will just have to mow again. And as Iran's reconstitution effort goes underground and its defenses are enhanced, Israel's intelligence and military capabilities will have to keep pace. They also argue, however, that the advantages of buying time should not be disregarded.

Thus, the 1981 Osirak attack won two crucial decades during which Operation Desert Storm effectively disarmed Iraq and Operation Iraqi Freedom finally decapitated it. Neither tectonic event could have been predicted in 1981. (The counterargument is that the Osirak raid stimulated Iraq to switch to an highly enriched uranium [HEU] route and vastly increased the money and manpower devoted to the program. Whether or not the bombing set back Iraq's program, the point is that many Israelis believe that it did.) On this Israeli view, a strike might prove worthwhile in ways that neither Israel nor the United States can anticipate at this stage.

In assessing the likelihood of an attack, it is useful to look back on the origins of the Six Day War in 1967 and the raid on the Osirak reactor in Iraq. In each case, Israel attacked only after a long period of procrastination. In 1967, Washington's hands-off posture tipped the balance in the cabinet in favor of preemption. In the case of Osirak, the Carter and Reagan administrations' unwillingness or incapacity to intervene left Israel feeling cornered and compelled to act unilaterally. One lesson to be learned from this is that Israel is more likely to use force if it perceives Washington to be disengaged.

Finally, if the Russian analysis is correct—namely, that the sort of crippling sanctions that would help stave off an Israeli attack would also drive Iran out of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT)—then the probability of an Israeli strike would be correspondingly higher, since Iranian withdrawal from the NPT would itself be a *casus belli*. Moreover, Iran's withdrawal would diminish the diplomatic opportunity cost of an attack.

#### *WARNING INDICATORS*

Surprise would be essential to the success of an attack and Israel's operational security would be correspondingly strong. Accordingly, tactical warning would be elusive. However, certain indicators have already surfaced; the appearance of others could indicate an Israeli intent to attack.

One indicator would be Israeli efforts to enhance the operational feasibility of the military option before a political decision to attack. Such actions would also serve the dual purpose of signaling Iran and others of Israel's resolve and capability with an eye to deterring further Iranian movement toward a nuclear weapons capability. Recent developments in this category include the June 2008 long-range joint-air exercise—involving one hundred aircraft, long-range combat search and rescue helicopters, and refueling aircraft—which corresponded in scale and reach to an Israeli strike against Iran. The unprecedented June 2009 passage of an Israeli submarine through the Suez Canal, which showed that Israel had a maritime attack option in addition to air strikes, and that Jerusalem would have the support of at least one regional state, namely Egypt, represents another such signal. Similar indicators that might not be apparent outside of intergovernmental deliberations or the intelligence domain could include requests for targeting data and/or repositioning of strike aircraft within Israel once an attack path had been selected.

Other operational preparations could also portend Israeli action. These include bolstering homeland security, especially if it involves an emphasis on shelter locations, distribution of gas masks, or similar precautions against retaliatory attack. Tactical changes, including redeployment of ground forces to reinforce Israeli Northern Command and potentially enter Lebanon from a cold start, could also indicate a stronger likelihood of an Israeli attack.

Political developments inside Israel and Iran could also presage a decision to attack. For instance, broader public references to the Holocaust and warnings that time is running out would suggest an

increasing probability of Israeli action. Netanyahu has sounded these themes regularly. If the political opposition echoed them, domestic political barriers to attack would have lowered.

Finally, delivery of advanced Russian S-300 surface to air missiles to Iran, which would multiply the risks of an air attack, might spur Israel to strike before the missiles were fielded.

#### *POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES FOR U.S. INTERESTS*

Some observers would view an Israeli attack that significantly degraded Iran's nuclear weapons capability as beneficial to U.S. counterproliferation objectives and ultimately to U.S. national security. The United States has a clear interest in the integrity of the NPT regime and the compliance of member states with meaningful inspection arrangements. The use of force against Iran's nuclear program would, at a minimum, show that attempts to exploit the restraint of interested powers, manipulate the diplomatic process, game the NPT, and impede International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access to nuclear-related facilities could carry serious penalties. Were Iran to acquire a nuclear weapons capability, the ability of the U.S. military forces to operate freely in the vicinity of Iran could, under some circumstances, be constrained. Looking into the future, a hostile Iran could also develop reliable long-range delivery systems for nuclear warheads that could strike American territory.

At the same time, an Israeli attack—even if operationally successful—would pose immediate risks to U.S. interests.

First, regardless of perceptions of U.S. complicity in the attack, the United States would probably become embroiled militarily in any Iranian retaliation against Israel or other countries in the region. Given uncertainties about the future of Iraq and a deepening commitment to Afghanistan, hostilities with Iran would stretch U.S. military capabilities at a particularly difficult time while potentially derailing domestic priorities.

Second, an Israeli strike would cause oil prices to spike and heighten concerns that energy supplies through the Persian Gulf may become disrupted. Should Iran attempt to block the Strait of Hormuz by mining, cruise missile strikes, or small boat attacks, these fears would become realized. According to the GAO, however, the loss of Iranian oil for eighteen months would increase prices by only \$6 to \$11/bbl, assuming that the International Energy Agency coordinated release of reserves. This said, at the onset of the crisis, prices might hit \$200/bbl (up from the current level of around \$77/bbl) for a short period but would likely quickly subside.

Third, since the United States would be viewed as having assisted Israel, U.S. efforts to foster better relations with the Muslim world would almost certainly suffer. The United States has an enduring strategic interest in fostering better relations with the Muslim world, which is distinct from the ruling elites on whom the United States depends for an array of regional objectives. In part, this interest derives from the need to lubricate cooperation between the United States and these governments by lowering some of the popular resentment of Washington that can hem in local leaders and impede their support for U.S. initiatives. A narrative less infused by anti-Americanism also facilitates counterterrorism goals and, from a longer-range perspective, hedges against regime change. The perceived involvement of the United States in an Israeli attack would undercut these interlocking interests, at least for a while.

Fourth, the United States has a strong interest in domestically generated regime change in Iran. Although some argue that the popular anger aroused in Iran by a strike would be turned against a discredited clerical regime that seemed to invite foreign attack after its bloody postelection repres-

sion of nonviolent opposition, it is more likely that Iranians of all stripes would rally around the flag. If so, the opposition Green movement would be undermined, while the ascendant hard-line clerics and Revolutionary Guard supporters would face fewer constraints in consolidating their hold on power.

Fifth, an Israeli attack might guarantee an overtly nuclear weapons capable Iran in the medium term.

Sixth, although progress toward an Israeli-Palestinian final status accord remains elusive, an Israeli strike, especially one that overflowed Jordan or Saudi Arabia, would delay fruitful renewed negotiation indefinitely. Both Washington and Jerusalem would be too preoccupied with managing the consequences of an attack, while regional capitals would deflect U.S. appeals to upgrade relations with Israel as an incentive to concessions. If Hamas or Hezbollah were to retaliate against Israel, either spontaneously or in response to Iranian pressure to act, any revival of the peace process would be further set back.

Finally, the United States has an abiding interest in the safety and security of Israel. Depending on the circumstances surrounding an Israeli attack, the political-military relationship between Jerusalem and Washington could fray, which could erode unity among Democrats and embolden Republicans, thereby complicating the administration's political situation, and weaken Israel's deterrent. Even if an Israeli move on Iran did not dislocate the bilateral relationship, it could instead produce diplomatic rifts between the United States and its European and regional allies, reminiscent of tensions over the Iraq war.

#### *U.S. POLICY OPTIONS TO FORESTALL AN ISRAELI STRIKE*

Assuming that the U.S. continues to assess an Israeli attack to be undesirable, options to forestall or hedge against a strike would have to be geared to negating factors that would lead Israel to assess that the benefits of an attack outweigh the costs. These factors include perceptions that the White House has given at least a yellow light to the strike; that the United States is disengaged either because it has run out of diplomatic options or because an agreement with Iran has met Washington's security objectives but left Israel exposed; and that the United States has not proffered to Israel convincing security guarantees against a nuclear-capable Iran. This list implies the importance of firm, direct communication of U.S. opposition to a strike from the White House to the Israeli prime minister; continued U.S. engagement that reflects an awareness of Israel's greater exposure to the Iranian threat relative to that of the United States; and a willingness to consider a palpable tightening of the U.S.-Israel strategic relationship that secures Israeli restraint and, conversely, warns of a rupture should Israel attack Iran despite the U.S. president's explicit opposition. If, over time, events develop in a way that, from a U.S. perspective, more fully warrants Israeli anxiety, the balance between warning and reassurance would of course shift, both privately and publicly.

To facilitate this new bilateral understanding, Washington could take any or all of the following preventive measures:

- make progress toward a verifiable, highly transparent agreement with Iran that will make it very difficult to produce highly enriched uranium and/or weapons-grade plutonium, and secondarily to weaponize.

- recreate the “Eagleburger” Mission. In 1991, Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger led two small delegations to Israel when it was under Iraqi Scud attack. His objective was to urge Israeli restraint. The missions succeeded because the United States was firm in refusing Israeli access to Iraqi airspace, but worked with Israel on ways the United States could destroy the Scuds. The United States should establish a similar channel to Israel (if it has not been already) to gauge Israeli intentions and discuss steps to reduce the threat to Israel, while arguing that an Israeli military option would test the U.S.-Israel relationship without reducing the long-term Iranian threat. Other objectives would be to make clear that overflight of Iraq would not be permitted; share the U.S. assessment of the risks and potential costs of overflight of third countries; and explore Israeli expectations and response options about Iranian retaliation.
- continue to declare the “unacceptable” nature of a nuclear Iran and that “all options remain on the table” to reassure Israel that the United States would not seek a diplomatic accommodation that compromised Israel’s security.
- send high-profile visitors to Israel on reassurance missions; a presidential visit to express solidarity with Israel and emphasize measures the United States is taking on the nuclear issue would be helpful.
- extend to Israel the option of a defense treaty with the United States. Such a treaty would contain unambiguous security guarantees to Israel that it would be covered by the U.S. “nuclear umbrella” so as to deter Iran. Although it is unclear whether Israel would welcome such a treaty, other states that felt threatened by Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons, notably Egypt and Saudi Arabia, would likely demand similar coverage if it were extended to Israel.

Finally, the United States could also consider the option advocated by former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, that of the United States actively impeding an Israeli attack once it is under way. It is hard to imagine, however, that the United States would risk the severe—even permanent—damage such action would incur on its longstanding strategic relationship with Israel.

#### *U.S. POLICY OPTIONS TO MITIGATE/MANAGE A CRISIS*

While doing all it can to forestall an Israeli attack, the United States must also plan for managing and minimizing the crisis that would ensue if the primary policy fails and Israel does in fact attack Iran. Such planning should include the following steps:

- work with basing countries—especially Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—on first response, consequence management capacities, and intelligence exchanges;
- ramp up air defenses and force protection in the Gulf and Iraq;
- discuss the possibility of Iranian retaliation and responses with Iraqi president Nuri al-Maliki and senior Iraqi security officials;

- approach Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait with requests to increase oil production should Iran attempt to block the Strait of Hormuz, attack shipping, or damage transloading facilities or offshore installations;
- ensure the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve is sufficient to offset shortages if necessary;
- use diplomatic and intelligence channels to urge increased readiness levels in friendly countries where there is an Iranian Revolutionary Guard or a Hezbollah presence; and
- provide additional ballistic missile defense capabilities to Israel to defend against potential Iranian retaliation.

### *RECOMMENDATIONS*

Israeli leaders have stated repeatedly that the problem posed by Iran's pursuit of mastery over the nuclear fuel cycle was the responsibility of the international community. For straightforward diplomatic reasons, Israel has not wanted the problem to be seen as Israel's alone. Such a perception would essentially permit important players to abandon the field, leaving Israel to cope with a threat that many believe to be existential. While the historical record shows Israel will act in the face of such a threat, there is a keen awareness among Israelis that the use of force would carry profound risks and, potentially, be open-ended. Room exists, therefore, for the United States to persuade Israel to exercise restraint. This goal will require a delicate balance of caution and reassurance.

As a first step, the United States and Israel should establish a high-level back channel to explore the issues raised by Iran's behavior and share views about managing them. Diplomacy, even secret diplomacy, does not necessarily entail total self-disclosure. But the situation demands frank discussion. As close allies exposed unequally to a consequential threat, conducting it will not be easy. There will be contentious issues, including definition of red lines and the comprehensiveness of U.S. assurances necessary to win the cooperation of a close ally boxed in by an indispensable patron and an implacable enemy. Above all, Israel must not be left to feel alone. Accordingly, the second step will be to maintain the cohesion of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany (the 5 + 1) that have taken the lead in diplomatic efforts, and to keep up the pressure on Iran. Simultaneously, the United States must hedge against the failure of a war-avoidance policy, and begin preparing for an Israeli attack on Iran and Iranian retaliation. This will be a thorny process insofar as defensive measures the United States takes in the region, or urges its allies to take, could be read in Tehran as preparation for an attack and thus cast as justification for further destabilizing Iranian action.

Israel is not eager for war with Iran, or to disrupt its special relationship with the United States. But the fact remains that it considers the Iranian threat an existential one and its bilateral relationship with the United States a durable one, and will act if it perceives momentous jeopardy to the Israeli people or state. Thus, while Israel may be amenable to American arguments for restraint, those arguments must be backed predominantly by concrete measures to contain the threat and reaffirmations of the special relationship, and only secondarily by warnings of the deterioration of the relationship, to be persuasive.

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