

ISRAEL-IRAN, A WAR IN THE MAKING

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Following several weeks of rising tension between Israel and Iran, feelings are running high. Jerusalem is threatening to deliver a preventive strike against the Iranian nuclear installations. Tehran has responded by highlighting its capabilities of blocking the Straits of Ormuz, through which more than 40% of the world's oil is transported¹ or by threatening Israel with total destruction² as well as delivering strikes against US bases in the Persian Gulf³.

The latest report of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) concerning Iran published on 14 September 2012 has just strengthened the Israeli position, which places in doubt the policy of international sanctions. It appears that for years Iran has been concealing the progress of its military nuclear program and in the very near future it shall be very close to being a new member of the (still) tightly restricted club of powers possessing an operational weapon of mass destruction.

Furthermore, the threat of an Israeli-Iranian war has been brought into the American electoral campaign at the insistence of Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, in order to compel Barack Obama to accept the principle of a 'red line'⁴ to be imposed on the Iranian Republic.

¹ On Sunday, 16 September the biggest naval manoeuvres in the history of the Persian Gulf got under way. Scheduled to last 11 days, this exercise of mine clearance directed by the US Navy brought together the navies of America, England and France, as well of units from nearly 30 other countries. A spokesman for the US Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain indicated that the exercise: '*Was intended to ensure freedom of navigation in the international waters of the Middle East and to promote regional stability*'. Cited by the electronic edition of the French language Lebanese daily *L'Orient Le jour* dated 18 September:

http://www.lorientlejour.com/category/Moyen+Orient+et+Monde/article/778718/Les_Etats-Unis_conduisent_un_imposant_exercice_navail_dans_le_Golfe.html

² General Mohammad Ali Jafari, the commander-in-chief of the Revolutionary Guards, said on Sunday, 16 September, on the occasion of one of his very rare press conferences: "*Nothing will remain of Israel given its small size and our ballistic capabilities. No region of Israel will be spared, and that must constitute an element of dissuasion*".

³ Ibid.

⁴ On Sunday, 16 September, the Israeli Prime Minister granted an interview to American television channels during which he once again insisted on the necessity of setting down a 'red line' for Iran. Netanyahu said that within 6 months Iran will be capable of producing a nuclear weapon, which would represent a danger not only for Israel but also for the United States and the international community. It should be emphasised that the press conference of General Ali Jafari was given in immediate response to that of the Israeli Prime Minister.

In this context of an increasing number of statements from the various protagonists, analyses of more or less competent contributors abound in the media of the whole world. You can read the most diverse opinions on the scenarios of Israeli attacks and on Iran's capacity for counter-attack ; on the offensive and defensive weapons present in the region ; and on the real or pretended intentions⁵ of the Israelis to attack Iran without support from their American ally.

To be sure, in the permanent flow of information relating to the risk of outbreak of an Iranian-Israeli war, with or without the participation of the United States, the central question is the Israeli determination to remain true to its military doctrine, which, in particular, advocates that military capability and occasional use of force must maintain the image and reputation of a country located in a hostile environment⁶ and which cannot permit itself the slightest show of weakness in front of its enemies.

This military doctrine was, as Peter Scott Ford⁷ has shown, the element which determined the decision of the government of Israeli Prime Minister Menahem Begin to bomb the Iraqi nuclear station at Osirak on 7 June 1981. It is very likely that in the end the Israeli doctrine and the determination of the few political leaders who are members of the inner Security Cabinet will be the driving elements of a decision-making process leading to an Israeli-Iranian war. In this case, the decision to attack or not in unilateral manner will be taken in Israel in full privacy and this despite the international calls for Jerusalem to be patient.

Israel and the nuclear threat: a military doctrine threatened

For Peter Scott Ford, ever since independence the Israeli military doctrine militaire rests on 4 central pillars which may be presented succinctly as follows:

1. The defence forces must permanently be considered by potential adversaries as capable of very effective counter-attack. This principle of dissuasion remains fundamental right up to today. The 3 further principles underpin the credibility of this principle of dissuasion.
2. The defence forces must aim at maximal autonomy. This principle lies at the base of the heavy arms programmes (tanks, missiles, avionics, etc.) developed by the Israeli arms industry. Of course, the Israeli armed forces are far from being completely autonomous (American F16, F15, F35 planes, German submarines, etc.).
3. Training and the constant requirement to have well prepared and well equipped units.
4. Preventive attacks are one of the keys, even if they are relatively rare, to an effective policy of dissuasion. We may add that this rarity requires that every preventive operation demonstrate its effectiveness in reaching the fixed objectives.

Efraim Inbar⁸ believes that the military doctrine has been adapted to the nuclear threat since the end of the 1970s. From the time of Prime Minister Menahem Begin⁹, Israel must be ready

⁵ The Israeli threats of a preventive and unilateral attack on Iran have regularly been considered as a technique of bluff and of pressure on the American government and, more generally, on international opinion.

In this regard, see, for example, the article by Jodi Rudoren published in the *New York Times* on 15 August, available on line: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/16/world/middleeast/israeli-leaders-dissuaded-strike-iran-us-sanctions.html?_r=1&smid=tw-share

Also on the same subject, the very critical analysis by the Foundation For Middle East Peace : <http://www.fmep.org/analysis/analysis/the-israeli-bluff>

⁶ In this regard, one cannot overly recommend reading the article by Efraim Inbar: "*Israeli National Security, 1973-1996*" published in January 1998 in the very serious journal "The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences".

⁷ Ford P.S. : "*Israel's attack on Osiraq: A model for future preventive strikes ?*", the output of a study presented to the Naval Postgraduate School in 2004. See page 9

⁸ Op.cit, see pages 64 and following.

to act rapidly and, if need be, in full autonomy, to destroy in a preventive way all infrastructures capable of supplying an enemy country ¹⁰with nuclear arms.

From this perspective, the concept of preventive attack becomes nearly automatic in case of nuclear threat. *Operation Opera*, conducted on 7 June 1981 by Israel against the Iraqi nuclear station of Osirak and, more recently, the raid carried out by Israel on 6 September 2007 against the Syrian nuclear installations under construction in the region of Dir a-Zur¹¹ are two examples of this.

It should nonetheless be stressed that the attacks of the Israeli Air Force on Iraqi and Syrian targets took place in military and political contexts which were very different from a possible unilateral operation having as its target the Iranian infrastructures.

At the time of *Operation Opera*, Iraq was bogged down in its war against Iran. Any response to the Israeli attack would surely have opened a new front, a catastrophic scenario for the Iraqi Army.

Similarly, the under-equipment of the Syrian Army did not allow it to envisage a muscular reaction following the bombardment of the site at Dir a-Zur. This was all the more so, given that the Syrian regime had nothing to gain by implicitly admitting that it was engaged in the race for nuclear arms.

The case of Iran is totally different. Tehran has everything to gain by energetically responding to an Israel attack. By acting in this way Shiite and Persian Iran, representing a minority position in the Arab Middle East with its Sunni majority, will enhance its credit and its image in an environment which considers Israel as the 'enemy to beat'.

Furthermore, Iran has military resources and allies (Syria, Hezbollah and, to a lesser extent, Hamas) capable of delivering serious blows on the Jewish state. On 15 August, the international press reverberated with the statements of Matan Vilnai, the outgoing Minister of Passive Defence who predicted that a war against Iran would result in 500 civilian deaths in Israel and would last one month. By way of comparison, the second war of Lebanon (2006) lasted 33 days and resulted in 48 civilian deaths on the Israeli side.

Lastly, without any doubt Iran has the resources necessary to very seriously disrupt navigation in the Persian Gulf (laying mines in the Straits of Ormuz), as well as to strike directly at American military bases in the region.

⁹ One must stress the ideological closeness between Menahem Begin and Benjamin Netanyahu on the matter of preventing the nuclear risk.

¹⁰ The idea of a friendly or enemy country would all by itself merit an in-depth article into the very complex case of Israeli foreign policy. The case of Egypt, with whom Israel is officially at peace and maintains diplomatic relations, gives us some idea of this complexity. Despite the state of peace presently prevailing between these two countries, it is not very likely, if not to say unthinkable, that Israel would accept and not react if it saw Egypt joining the nuclear arms race.

¹¹ Although the information has never been officially confirmed by Israel, there can be no doubt it is a reality. In this regard, the French daily *Le Figaro* reminds us of the note dated 25 April 2008 disseminated by Wikileaks. Condoleezza Rice, then Secretary of State, had informed American diplomatic representatives abroad that: "On 6 September 2007, Israel destroyed a nuclear reactor secretly constructed by Syria, apparently with the assistance of North Korea".

<http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2010/12/24/97001-20101224FILWWW00340-syrie-israel-a-vise-un-reacteur-nucleaire.php>

The international consequences of an Israeli attack (explosion of the price of oil) and, above all, the risk of drawing in the United States as their defenders in a war on Iran will certainly cause the Netanyahu government to reflect¹².

Nonetheless, the possibility of an Iran supplied with nuclear arms remains completely unacceptable for Israel. It is not that the political leaders and senior military officers seriously envisage an Iranian nuclear attack. That would immediately spark a definitive Israeli counter-attack and, a priori, there are no indications that the Iranian regime is suicidal. But if the Iranian Republic were to make itself secure by holding military nuclear capability and there were a heightened risk of regional proliferation in the medium term, the confidence of the Israeli population in its future would be considerably damaged.

It is clearly this damage to the national self-confidence and the putting at risk of its military doctrine which are at the centre of the concerns of the Israeli government, of the security apparatus of the country and, more generally, of all the vital Israeli forces¹³.

Dissension within Israel

As Benjamin Netanyahu recently mentioned, the possible decision to launch a military operation against Iran falls solely within the Executive powers of government: *“Political decisions are taken at the political level, and the military level executes these decisions”*. This clarification by the Prime Minister followed his sharp cross-examination in the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, par Shaul Mofaz, the chairman of Kadima, the main opposition party: *“Who is our enemy, Iran or America? Which government would you like to see fall: the one in Washington or the one in Tehran? Mr. Prime Minister, at what point are you ready to put at risk relations with America?”*¹⁴.

Even within the reduced Security Cabinet, the atmosphere hardly seems more favourable towards Netanyahu. A session of the Cabinet scheduled to take place on Wednesday, 5 September, had to be cancelled following ‘leaks’ in the Israeli press.

To the great displeasure of Benjamin Netanyahu, the Minister of Defence, Ehud Barak, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Avigdor Lieberman, both members of the Cabinet, nonetheless hastened to join the view already expressed by the leader of the Opposition, namely that it was necessary to avoid embarrassing Barack Obama during the last leg of the electoral campaign.

The chief of the military staff, Benny Ganz, also does not miss any chance to display a position which is embarrassing for the head of government in the national press by repeating there that while Iran should be prevented at all costs from getting nuclear arms it would be preferable for Israel to receive American military and diplomatic assistance in this matter. These statements are, of course, a reflection of the present refusal of the Obama administration to set down a ‘red line’ for Iran.

¹² In this regard, one may refer to the remarkable note prepared by the research services of the the US Congress under the title “Israel: Possible Military Strike Against Iran’s Nuclear Facilities“. The full document is available online:

<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R42443.pdf>

¹³ In this regard, see the chapter devoted to the Iranian nuclear programme (pages 14 to 17) in the note published by the research services of the US Congress under the title: “Israel: Background and US Relations“. The note is available online:

<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33476.pdf>

¹⁴This cross examination of the Prime Minister by the head of the Opposition took place in the context of growing tensions between Netanyahu and Barack Obama in the days following the recent and already famous affair of the ‘red line’. See note 4.

Other eminent voices of the Israeli intelligence community also made themselves heard and showed their divergence of views from the head of government. Not the least among them is certainly that of Meir Dagan. On Sunday, 11 March 2012, the former chief of Mossad¹⁵, the foreign intelligence service of Israeli, was asked about this issue by Lesley Stahl, a journalist from CBS News. On this occasion, Dagan very clearly expressed his scepticism over the effectiveness of a unilateral Israeli attack on the Iranian nuclear installations. He also mentioned the high risk of regional explosion in case of an Israeli attack¹⁶.

However, the consequences for a possible Israeli decision to attack the Iranian nuclear infrastructures of the indisputable and highly publicised tensions which divide the Israeli political class and security apparatus must not be overestimated. Firstly, as we mentioned in the preceding point, this is because they express more the concern to maintain the quality of diplomatic and security relations which the United States and Israel share¹⁷ than any real hope of seeing economic sanctions prevent Iran from procuring nuclear arms. Secondly, because the Israeli debate over the Iranian question is taking place with a view to the next legislative elections which will take place in October 2013. In view of the results of the electoral polls, the candidates¹⁸ have every interest to refrain from displaying, at least publicly, from their warlike ardour.

In this regard, we refer to the monthly barometer of public opinion conducted by the University of Tel Aviv on behalf of the Israeli Institute for Democracy¹⁹. The poll carried out for the period going from 7 July 2012 to 8 August 2012 is eloquent. We see there that the position defended by Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak in favour of a preventive attack against Iran garnered only 28% of opinions in favour²⁰. It also appeared from this study that 57% of those polled supported the more patient position explicitly recommended by the representatives of the security apparatus. Lastly, 61% of the respondents said they are opposed to any unilateral Israeli attack. In this context, one may doubt the effectiveness of the strategy of public pressure directed against the Obama administration used until very recently²¹ by Benjamin Netanyahu. On the other hand, a military operation against Iran crowned with success would surely cause a reversal of the situation and be especially favourable for the Prime Minister and his team. It goes without saying that electoral ambitions will not be the central argument of a decision to go to war but one cannot nevertheless totally exclude the possibility that this question will be included one way or another in the decision-making. The statements of Shaul Mofaz and Shelly Yachimovich (Labour Party, Opposition) following the speech by Benjamin Netanyahu at the United Nations²² are characteristic of the electoral climate. The two leaders of the Opposition claimed to have reached a discreet agreement with the United States but absolutely did not put in doubt the reality of the Iranian threat. It is more than likely that in case an Israeli

¹⁵ Active officers of the intelligence services do not customarily express their views publicly.

¹⁶ The hesitation of Meir Dagan was taken very seriously by Israeli public opinion, which had not forgotten that when he was the head of Mossad, he was one of the kingpins of the raid on Dir a-Zur, as well as of the operations to eliminate the Iranian engineers engaged in the Iranian nuclear programme.

¹⁷ Relations which are indispensable to the security of Israel. Without even mentioning the US role as 'protector' in the United Nations Security Council, American economic and military assistance remain indispensable for Jerusalem.

¹⁸ Shaul Mofaz, Avigdor Lieberman and Ehud Barak are already candidates. It is very likely that the present chief of the military staff, Benny Ganz, who is approaching the end of his career, is very seriously dreaming of a return to politics, following the example of his predecessors, Mofaz and Barak. Lastly, the political ambitions of Meir Dagan are being mentioned more and more regularly.

¹⁹ <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonthEng.aspx?num=244&monthname=July> Documents in English.

²⁰ These numbers very probably caused the Minister of Defence to gradually distance himself from the Prime Minister.

²¹ Speech by the Israeli Prime Minister to the United Nations on Thursday, 27 September 2012.

²² The Israeli Prime Minister returned here to his demand that an American and international 'red line' be drawn before the Iranian nuclear programme.

attack is launched they would make a common front with the head of the government in the name of the higher interests of the nation.

An Israeli attack on Iran : a realistic scenario?

One recalls that at the start of September 2012, the world press disseminated information relating to a possible Israeli project to launch an electromagnetic impulse (EMI) against Iran. Certain media also predicted in apocalyptic fashion, that Iran would be returned to 'the stone age' following the damage or the destruction of all its electronic equipment. At the source of this so-called information was an American specialist in security matters, Bill Gertz, who writes a column on the conservative website "The Washington Free Beacon". An EMI is created by a nuclear explosion at very high altitude. While this type of attack is technically possible, it is totally excluded that Israel would take the major political risk of being the first nuclear power to use atomic weapons since the end of the Second World War. That is so notwithstanding the fact that such a procedure does not directly threaten the population on the ground.

However, one cannot exclude the possibility suggested by Uzi Rubin²³ that Israel would use a non-nuclear electromagnetic pulse (NNEMP), created using generators of microwaves carried by cruise missiles or drones. The range of an NNEMP is however much smaller than that from an EMI of nuclear origin.

But the scenario of an Israeli attack could be much more 'classic' and, above all, realistic.

Among the very many scenarios devoted to the question of a unilateral Israeli attack, the one²⁴ which has been offered by Whitney Raas and Austing Long is very certainly one of the most interesting. It differs from competing documents in three essential ways: the expertise of its authors²⁵, the quality of the sources used, as well as the rigour of thinking based on classical arms and munitions.

At the end of a demonstration which takes into account the respective air forces of Israel and Iran, the munitions held by Israel, the anti-aircraft capabilities of Iran, as well as the possible air routes and the technical difficulties linked to the refueling of the Israeli aircraft, the two authors conclude that Israel appears to have the capabilities necessary to carry out a raid which would set back the Iranian nuclear programme for a long time. They even add that the operation properly speaking would not be more risky than that carried out against the Iraqi reactor in Osirak.

One must also emphasise that the Israeli Army and passive defence are actively preparing for possible consequences of a counter-attack by Iran and its allies. The very recent large-scale military manoeuvres are one of the latest demonstrations of these preparations. On Wednesday, 19 September, the Army tested its system for mobilising units of reservists which

²³ Uzi Rubin is an engineer who has, in particular, participated in perfecting the Israeli anti-missile shield. He was interviewed by the *Sunday Times* (edition dated 9 September). In this interview, Uzi Rubin said that: "*it is out of the question that Israel would use a nuclear device, even for non-lethal use such as an EMI. There are methods for creating an EMI from the ground*". Picked up by *Le Monde* :

http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2012/09/09/israel-songerait-a-lancer-une-impulsion-electromagnetique-sur-l-iran_1757695_3218.html

²⁴ Raas W. and Long A., "Osirak Redux ? Assessing Israeli Capabilities to Destroy Iranian Nuclear Facilities", available online on the site of Harvard University

http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/is3104_pp007-033_raas_long.pdf

²⁵ Whitney Raas is a researcher at the Center for Naval Analyses in Alexandria, Virginia. She holds a degree in political science and in nuclear engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Austin Long is a doctoral student in political sciences at MIT and is also an associate of MIT's Security Studies Program.

were transported to the Golan Heights (northern front). The exercise mobilised units of the infantry, heavy artillery batteries plus troop transport helicopters. Despite diplomatic denials from the spokesman of Tsahal, these manoeuvres are part of the Israeli plan of preparations for an Iranian counterattack. The northern front is the one that must respond to fire from the Hezbollah, without forgetting, to be certain, the possible entry of Syria into the conflict. The tottering regime of al-Assad could find an honourable exit from a civil war whose end is unpredictable by attacking the Zionist enemy.

Moreover, naval manoeuvres²⁶ baptised 'Incmed', which brought together nearly 30 war fleets under American command in the Persian Gulf in the second half of the month of September, had the stated objective of responding to an Iranian counter-attack against an Israeli or American-Israeli attack. The fear of minefields in the Straits of Ormuz, the highly sensitive point of passage of oil supplies to the Western countries, cannot be 'taken lightly'.

The scenario of an Israeli attack

A possible unilateral Israeli attack on the Iranian nuclear infrastructures can be envisioned only if Jerusalem is able to deal with three major difficulties: to reach the distant targets with a sufficient number of combat planes, to have munitions adapted to the nature of the targets and to avoid excessive losses which would compromise the operational effectiveness of the bombardments.

The first challenge which the Israeli Air Force will face consists in bringing to the targets a sufficient number of fighter planes, knowing that whichever route is taken²⁷ they must be refueled in flight. According to data provided by the research services of Congress, Israel must commit 100 planes to an operation which is aimed simultaneously against the infrastructures of Natanz, Ispahan and Arak. The destruction or at least serious damage to these three targets would ensure a very significant delay in the Iranian nuclear programme²⁸. Although the Israeli Air Force has around 350 modern combat planes, an operation which would require the use of a combat fleet of 100 planes is very likely above its resources. This is so firstly because only a limited number of Israeli combat planes are prepared to carry out missions at very great distance, which would be the case in any attack on Iran. Secondly, because the in-flight refueling capabilities of the Israeli Army are, according to all serious sources, too limited²⁹. Raas and Long³⁰ envisage a more realistic scenario based on an attack conducted by 25 F15I and 25 F16I³¹, planes especially designed for long distance missions and which could operate in three waves, each dedicated to one of the three targets. Such an operation would make it possible to deal a very serious blow to the Iranian infrastructures. It

²⁶ The biggest manoeuvres in terms of tonnage ever to have taken place in the Persian Gulf. See the note at the bottom of page 1.

²⁷ At present, the most obvious and direct route: overflight of Jordan, Iraq and penetration into Iranian air space. Given the quality of security relations presently between the Hashemite Kingdom and Israel, one can assume that Amman would let the Israeli fleet come and go with nothing more than a pro forma protest afterwards. For its part, the United States no longer looks after the protection of Iraqi skies ever since its withdrawal from the country in December 2011. This recent situation makes it possible to avoid a diplomatically sensitive situation. Moreover, the anti-aircraft resources of Iraq are presently nearly nonexistent. Finally, this direct route is also the shortest. It is even compatible with the combat range (Natanz is located 1,750 km from the Israeli bases) of the F15I and F16I.

²⁸ Israel: Possible Military Strike Against Iran's Nuclear Facilities, *op. cit.*, see page 29.

²⁹ According to reliable sources, Israel has approximately 7 refueling planes and would be able to deal with the fuel needs of some fifty planes.

³⁰ *Op.cit.*, see page 20 and following.

³¹ Raas and Long offer calculations of the effectiveness of bombardments using munitions that have proven themselves already long ago (BLU 109 and 113 or GRU 10). The scenario which they propose takes into account the lifting capacity of the Israeli fighter bombers, the nature of the defences (earth, concrete, and the depth at which the Iranian infrastructures iraniennes have been buried), as well as a loss of 8 to 10% of the planes in action (mechanical problems, DCA, enemy pursuit).

should be noted that in case of an attack, Israel would have every reason to delay the date as much as possible. In effect, with the passage of time the Iranians have equipped Natanz with centrifuges. The total or partial destruction of the site should be as late as possible to cause the most consequential damage.

A priori, the excellence of the flight crew and the quality of the materiel allow us to believe that the scenario of an Israeli attack on the Iranian targets would be crowned with success. At least if one considers a delay of many years to the Iranian military nuclear programme to mean success. On the other hand, only the fall of the Iranian regime or at least a radical change in its military doctrine could put a conclusive end to Iranian ambitions with respect to military nuclear capability.

Conclusion

Most observers have placed their bets on an operation of bluff, maladroit to boot, conducted by Benjamin Netanyahu. This is an anti-Iranian campaign whose modalities, more particularly, placing the Obama administration in a difficult spot, have been decried in Israel itself. And without forgetting that the counter-attack capabilities of the Iranian Republic and its allies are far from being negligible. In this context, and without devoting attention to the madness of those who predict an Iran sent back to the 'stone age', everything suggests that Israel will not embark on a war against Iran without the agreement, and still better, the military participation of the United States.

But this view may forget too quickly the real stakes of the situation as seen in Israel. Let us recall that an Iran which would be protected by the nuclear bomb is an Iran which would destroy the Israeli military doctrine and, beyond that, the development model of the sole democratic society in the Middle East.

The imminence of a unilateral Israeli attack on Iran is perhaps much closer than is suggested by the ever larger number of people who are betting on a strategy of bluff.