

# **AN ISRAELI STRIKE AT IRAN**

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Israel, the United States and Sunni – led Arab states are worried that Iran might produce nuclear weapon, the Bomb. An agreement between the P5 + 1 and Iran about the latter's nuclear program would prevent Israel from attacking Iran. Yet if the latter ignores this accord Israel might attack. Sunni – led Arab states, mostly those in the Gulf could assist Israel.

## **The Iranian – Israeli conflict**

There has been an ongoing cold war between Israel and Iran since 1979<sup>1</sup> although they have no major reason for dispute. They don't share borders so they don't struggle on land or natural resources etc. as it is between Israel and the Palestinians. The Iranian - Israeli conflict is mostly due to Iran's ideology and desire to both destroy Israel and to gain influence across the Middle East. The Iranian government such as their supreme leader Ali Khamenei expressed over the years fierce anti-Israeli declarations. Therefore the main problem Israel has with Iran has to do with the regime there not with the Iranian people.

Israel that according to non-Israeli sources has a nuclear arsenal,<sup>2</sup> wants to stay the only state in the Middle East that has this kind of weapon. Iran strives to possess this unconventional weapon too for logical reasons, mostly to secure the regime from an outside attack, like an American one. Israel could understand this Iranian concept, since the Israeli Bomb is meant to defend the country. Yet Iran might use the Bomb to fulfil its regional ambitions such as to wipe out Israel.

Iran's religious faith and the willingness of some in Iran to pay an enormous price in return for annihilating Israel might bring a nuclear showdown. Such a collision might happen also due to miscalculations, by one or both sides. In the worst case scenario the first Iranian – Israeli war might be their last, since both of them might end up in rubble i.e. a failed state.

### **The American approach**

For Israel 'American support is indispensable. Were it not for Washington's political backing, Israel would be facing either crippling UN sanctions or dictates that would undermine its deterrence and threaten its existential interests.' The IDF (Israel defense forces) has been assimilating various American weapon systems for its air, ground and sea units.<sup>3</sup> Israel's Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon mentioned on 8 April 2015 that 'Israelis know that the United States is Israel's greatest friend and strategic ally.'<sup>4</sup> However there has been a serious dispute between the Obama administration and the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu regarding to the deal between the P5 +1 and Iran. President Obama expressed his disappointment with Netanyahu's objection to that accord. This issue causes tension between Israel and the United States.

Iran strives to delay an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear sites, while continuing to develop its nuclear weapon capability. The Obama administration wishes to prevent and at least to postpone any Israeli attack on Iran. In this sense Iran and the United States have the same interest: to buy time. As long as the talks between the P 5 + 1 and Iran go on Israel would not attack the Iranian nuclear infrastructure. Yet the negotiations could not continue forever. Even if there is a deal but Iran breaches it Israel might strike, hoping to have then more legitimacy for this move at least in the United States.

'Strict sanctions on Iran's key energy and financial sectors harmed Iran's economy.'<sup>5</sup> Some sanctions might be lifted if there is an agreement. But if Iran breaches the accord and rush to build a Bomb the United States might impose crippling sanctions so Iran's leadership would get the message: the effort to get the Bomb would bring an economic and political catastrophe, which might undermine the Iranian regime. Either way Israel might not wait very long for the Iranian people to overthrow their government since meanwhile Iran might obtain the Bomb. Therefore Israel could strike Iran.

On 31 March 2015 US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter said his country has a military option against Iran.<sup>6</sup> Yet President Barack Obama argued on 2 May 2015 that an attack is not the solution since it would only delay the Iranian nuclear project.<sup>7</sup> This might cause Israel to take the matter into its own hands.

### **An Israeli raid**

Any Israeli strike in Iran, due to the distance from Israel to Iran, which is more than a thousand kilometers, would be based on the IAF (Israeli air force). The attacking force would rely on F-15I and F-16I, Israel's best fighter – bombers (since it has no heavy bombers), tanker aircraft for air refueling, command and control planes and unmanned air vehicles. Israeli Special Forces might participate as well, landing from the air to gather intelligence before and after the raid. Some Iranian nuclear sites are heavily fortified. Cracking them would require bunker buster bombs. In May 2015 it was announced that the IAF would receive from the United States 700 BLU-109 Penetrator bunker buster missiles.<sup>8</sup>

Iran might assimilate the S – 300, a sophisticated anti-aircraft missile. The IAF already has been exercising against this weapon system as it did in training that took place in Greece in April 2015, where Israeli air crews, flying F-16, had a chance to check and improve their tactics against the S – 300.<sup>9</sup>

### **Israel and the Arab states in the Gulf**

Sunni - led Arab states in the Gulf (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman) are members of the GCC (Gulf cooperation council). Those Arab states barely participated in the wars against Israel. Instead they, some more some less, helped Arab states and outfits against Israel. GCC Members are considered to be relatively moderate in regard to Israel, since they support the 2002 Arab peace initiative to end the Arab – Israeli conflict.

There are secret business and also security ties between Israel and GCC Members, mostly regarding Iran.<sup>10</sup> GCC Members are concerned that Iran might produce the Bomb. 'This stems less from fear that Iran would ever use a nuclear bomb against them and more because of the prestige and increased influence Iran would gain.'<sup>11</sup> Israel's strong 'anti-Iran stance' is shared by Arab states such as Saudi Arabia.<sup>12</sup> Those common interests create a base for mutual cooperation against Iran.

Israel and Arab states like GCC Members don't have to sign any agreement between them, let alone one which would be announced publically, about an alliance against Iran. This pact could be kept secret and be expressed in several ways, according to the circumstances, constraints and goals of each of the partners. First of all there is the struggle to prevent Iran from having the Bomb. Then there is the fight against Iran's proxies in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

Arabs and Israelis fought together in the past against Arabs such as in Lebanon in 1982 when Arab Christians joined Israel against the PLO (Palestinian liberation organization) or in recent years in the West Bank where Palestinian security forces collaborate with their Israeli counterparts against the Hamas. If Arabs and Israelis could confront Arabs they could do the same against non-Arabs i.e. Iranian Persians. In addition Iran is Muslim like Arabs but under Shiite rule, while GCC Members and Israel are not.

Saudi Arabia has more than 250 advanced aircraft, many of them F- 15, and her air crews gained combat experience in bombing targets in Iraq and Yemen in 2014-2015. The UAE has about 140 F- 16 and Mirage 2000 and it is considered to have the best military in the Gulf.<sup>13</sup> However, a vast and open cooperation between those Arab militaries and Israel is very difficult to achieve due to military and mostly political reasons. At most GCC Members could assist an Israeli raid in Iran by allowing Israeli planes to fly over their country and by providing intelligence about their Iranian neighbor.

Israel destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981. In 2007 Israel wiped out another Arab nuclear reactor, this time in Syria.<sup>14</sup> For the latter and Iraq obviously it was a major setback while other Arab states had a good reason to be pleased. They did not want to see Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007 become too powerful, by holding the Bomb, which could have jeopardized their Arab neighbors. Although many Arab states helped Iraq in 1981 in its war against Iran this was more because of their fear of Iran and less due to their support of Iraq and her ambitious dictator, Saddam Hussein.

In 1990, two years after the Iran – Iraq showdown ended, Iraq invaded and seized an Arab state, Kuwait; which proved the suspicion Arabs had regarding Saddam Hussein. If the latter had the Bomb in 1990 it would have been much more difficult and maybe impossible to kick him out of Kuwait. The same could be said on the effort to topple Bashar al Assad since 2011, if he had nuclear weapon. If Iran has the Bomb it might decide to ignore Israel, since the latter has nuclear

weapons too. Instead Iran might go after those who don't have a nuclear shield: Arabs, mostly those that are near Iran i.e. Jordan and Arab Gulf States.

### **The Iranian retribution**

An Israeli strike on Iran particularly a successful one would make Iran eager to retaliate. Iran would launch surface to surface missiles at Israel, which might be intercepted by Israel's "Arrow" anti-ballistic missiles. Israel could then strike Iran again by bombing strategic targets there. Both sides could pound each other for days, weeks and maybe even months. This would be the start of a new stage in the long conflict between the two states.

Hezbollah, a powerful non state organization that is based in Lebanon, clashed with Israel, mostly in the 1980s, 1990s and in 2006. This pro – Iranian outfit now possesses about 100,000 missiles and rockets<sup>15</sup> that could reach every city, town and village in Israel. If Israel attacks Iran's nuclear sites the Hezbollah might launch its projectiles at Israel. In response Israel would run a full scale offensive in Lebanon.

The United States could assist Israel by providing military aid and diplomatic backup. The US – Israeli unofficial alliance would be put to the test like in refilling IDF's stockpiles with precision guided munition. Since the United States opposes the Israeli strike on Iran it might affect the American support to Israel.

Iran could blame GCC members for helping Israel to attack Iran, whether true or not. Iran could then retaliate by bombing Arab oil and natural gas sites. Iran might also block the Straits of Hormuz but this would bring an immediate US military intervention, which Iran might try to avoid. Iran might also use cyber warfare and "sleeper calls" to conduct terror attacks. This war in the Gulf would cause turmoil in the oil market. Therefore GCC members might hesitate if to support an Israeli strike unless they assume that if Iran produces the Bomb then GCC members would be in a much worse situation.

Furthermore if Iran attacks GCC members the latter could return a favor. They already proved in Yemen in 2015 their willingness to fight. GCC members could strike Iran's oil and natural gas sites that are within range of Arab planes flying from bases in the Gulf. Those aircraft might not run into much resistance. The Iranian air force, not a powerful corps to begin with, might lose many planes during the Israeli raid.

If Iranian leadership understands its oil and natural gas facilities might absorb severe damages it might restraint the Iranian response against GCC members. The Iranian regime is aware that rebuilding its nuclear infrastructure, following the Israeli attack, would require huge budgets. Without oil and gas revenues, if their infrastructure is heavily damaged by Arab bombardments, it would be quite a challenge to finance Iran's nuclear program. Therefore Iran might think twice before bashing Arabs' oil and gas industries. This might encourage GCC members to assist an Israeli raid on Iran.

### **The Jordanian and the Iraqi position**

The Hashemite kingdom (Jordan) does not want Iran to have nuclear weapons but Jordan also does not wish to be seen as collaborating with Israel against Iran. If Israel strikes Iran Israeli aircraft might have to pass over Jordan, which would test their relations and their 1994 peace treaty. Jordan has about 60 F-16<sup>16</sup> but they would probably not be sent to intercept Israeli planes because this might bring war between Israel and Jordan, which both states would try to avoid almost in all cost. Jordan might tolerate Israeli aircraft crossing her land twice, on their way to Iran and back. However if the IAF has to cross Jordan again and again, following an ongoing war with Iran, then Jordan would be in a jam. Israel has to take that into consideration in advance.

In the 1991 war Jordan had kind of a similar problem, because the kingdom is located between Israel and Iraq. In 1991 Israel was about to launch sorties through Jordan, aiming to bomb Iraq, after the latter fired missiles at Israeli cities. Jordan was caught between a rock and a hard place. Jordan then was an Iraqi ally but Jordan also kept close contact, a secret one, with Israel. Eventually Israel did not launch planes into Jordan. As to the current situation Jordan has no partnership with Iran and the former has peace with Israel, although a cold one. It gives some hope that Israel and Jordan could reach an understanding.

If Iran, rightly or not, assumes that Jordan assisted Israel to attack Iran then the latter would retaliate against the Hashemite kingdom. According to her typical pattern Iran would depend on proxies for this task, as Iran does in Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq etc. The Palestinians are the majority in Jordan but they don't run that country. Iran could promise those Palestinians that Iran would help them to seize control of Jordan.

Israeli planes, after passing over Jordan, would have to go over Iraq as well in order to reach Iran. Iraq is not hostile toward Israel as it used to be when Saddam Hussein was in power there but Iraq is now pro – Iranian. Nevertheless Iraq is entangled in a civil war and does not have much of an air force nor an air defense that could stop the IAF from hitting Iran.

## Conclusion

If there is an agreement about Iran's nuclear program but it would be breached by Iran in a certain point the United States might not bomb Iran but Israel might do that. Iran, including her proxies, mostly the Hezbollah, might retaliate.

Iran with a nuclear arsenal would be a danger not only to Israel but to Arab states too such as GCC members. A military cooperation between those Arab states and Israel against Iran would probably not be feasible. At most GCC members would allow Israeli planes to cross their countries. Iran could retaliate against GCC members but the ramifications of an Arab retribution against Iran's oil and gas industries might limit her actions. Other Arab states particularly Jordan would strive to stay outside this fight.

## Endnotes:

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/12/02/why-is-the-u-s-okay-with-israel-having-nuclear-weapons-but-not-iran/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23739770.2015.1015300>

<sup>4</sup> On Yaalon see: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/israels-defense-minister-the-risky-nuclear-framework-with-iran/2015/04/08/292a9cd2-de05-11e4-be40-566e2653afe5\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/israels-defense-minister-the-risky-nuclear-framework-with-iran/2015/04/08/292a9cd2-de05-11e4-be40-566e2653afe5_story.html)

<sup>5</sup> <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS20871.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2015/03/31/carter-says-iran-nuclear-deal-would-not-limit-us-military-option.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.timesofisrael.com/obama-a-deal-only-way-stop-iran-no-military-option/>

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/05/19-gcc-summit-obama-gulf-israel-iran-telhami>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.clingendael.nl/publication/adversity-and-opportunity>

<sup>13</sup> On the Saudi air force and the UAE:

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<sup>15</sup> On Hezbollah's missiles:

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