

# Should Israel Bomb Iran?

**Better safe than sorry**

**BY** Reuel Marc Gerecht <http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/should-israel-bomb-iran>

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There is only one thing that terrifies Washington's foreign policy establishment more than the prospect of an American airstrike against Iran's nuclear-weapons facilities: an Israeli airstrike. Left, right, and center, "sensible" people view the idea with alarm. Such an attack would, they say, do great damage to the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan, where Tehran would counterattack, punishing "the Great Satan" (America) for the sins of "the Little Satan" (Israel). An Israeli strike could lead to the closing of the world's oil passageway, the Strait of Hormuz; prompt Muslims throughout the world to rise up in outrage; and spark a Middle Eastern war that might drag in the United States. Barack Obama's "New Beginning" with Muslims, such as it is, would be over the moment Israeli bunker-busting bombs hit.

An Israeli "preventive" attack, we are further told, couldn't possibly stop the Islamic Republic from developing a nuke, and would actually make it more likely that the virulently anti-Zionist supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, would strike Israel with a nuclear weapon. It would also provoke Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps to deploy its terrorist assets against Israel and the United States. Hezbollah, the Islamic Revolution's one true Arab child, would unleash all the missiles it has imported from Tehran and Damascus since 2006, the last time the Party of God and the Jewish state collided.

An Israeli preemptive strike unauthorized by Washington (and President Barack Obama is unlikely to authorize one) could also severely damage Israel's standing with the American public, as well as America's relations with Europe, since the "diplomacy first, diplomacy only" Europeans would go ballistic, demanding a more severe punishment of Israel than Washington could countenance. The Jewish state's relations with the European Union—Israel's major trading partner—could collapse. And, last but not least, an Israeli strike could fatally compromise the pro-democracy Green Movement in Iran, which is the only hope the West has for an end to the nuclear menace by means of regime change. This concern was expressed halfheartedly before the tumultuous Iranian elections of June 12, 2009, but it is now voiced with urgency by those who truly care about the Green Movement spawned by those elections and don't want any American or Israeli action to harm it.

These fears are mostly overblown. Some of the alarmist scenarios are the opposite of what would more likely unfold after an Israeli attack. Although dangerous for Israel, a preventive strike remains the most effective answer to the possibility of Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards having nuclear weapons. Provided the Israeli air force

is capable of executing it, and assuming no U.S. military action, an Israeli bombardment remains the only conceivable means of derailing or seriously delaying Iran's nuclear program and—equally important—traumatizing Tehran. Since 1999, when the supreme leader quashed student demonstrations and put paid to any chance that the Islamic Republic would peacefully evolve under the reformist president Mohammad Khatami, Iran has calcified into an ever-nastier autocracy. An Israeli strike now—after the rise of the Green Movement and the crackdown on it—is more likely to shake the regime than would have a massive American attack in 2002, when Tehran's clandestine nuclear program was first revealed. And if anything can jolt the pro-democracy movement forward, contrary to the now passionately accepted conventional wisdom, an Israeli strike against the nuclear sites is it.

There are many voices out there—"realists" in America, Kantians in Europe—who believe this discussion is unnecessary since Iran doesn't really pose an existential threat to Israel, America, or anyone else, and whatever threat it does pose can be countered with "strategic patience" and the threat of Israeli nuclear retaliation. Tehran may support anti-Israeli terrorist groups, but there is no need to overreact: The regime is as scared of Israel's military power as Israel is scared of mullahs with nukes. America's preeminent job should therefore be to calm the Israelis down—or, failing that, arm-twist them into inaction.

### *Anti-Semitism run amok*

One can certainly doubt whether Khamenei would be so rash as to hurl an atomic weapon at Israel, given Jerusalem's undeclared *force de frappe*. But this is a huge unknown for the Jewish state. Iran has already embraced terrorism against Israel and the United States. Via Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas in Gaza, and Fatah on the West Bank, the clerics have repeatedly backed suicide bombers and helped launch thousands of missiles against Israeli civilians. Iranian-guided terrorist teams bombed the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992 and slaughtered Argentine Jews at a community center there in 1994. And that was when Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani was Iran's "pragmatic" president; Rafsanjani's once awe-inspiring power network at home has been nearly gutted by his former protégé, Khamenei, who has always been more Trotskyite when it comes to exporting the Islamic Revolution.

Iranian violent adventurism abroad diminished after Khatami was elected president in 1997, as the Islamic Republic's domestic agitation heated up and its clandestine nuclear program accelerated. If Khamenei can suppress the Green Movement and develop a bomb, he might choose to move beyond suicide bombers and Hezbollah and Hamas rocketry in his assaults on Israel and "global Jewry." Who would stop him? It's not hard to find Iranian dissidents grieved by their government's love affair with terrorism, but it's impossible to find any among the ruling elite who ruminate about the wrongness of terrorism against Israelis or Jews.

Anti-Zionism has deep roots in Iran's left-wing "red mullah" revolutionary ethos. Iran's hard core seems even more retrograde than the many militant Arab

fundamentalists who once gave intellectual support to al Qaeda but have lost some enthusiasm for the organization's insatiable and indiscriminate killing. The Egyptian-born former al Qaeda philosopher Abd al-Qadir bin Abd al-Aziz, aka "Dr. Fadl," for instance, has evolved so far as to express reservations about murdering Israelis and Jews. Even the Saudis, in private, are capable of entertaining such thoughts. But from Iran's power players we hear not a peep about the impropriety of killing Israeli civilians or Jews in general. This holds for Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; for the president's spiritual adviser and the most influential cleric supporting the dictatorship, Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi; for the head of Iran's legislation-surveilling, candidate-disqualifying Guardian Council, Ahmad Jannati; and for the bright and more "pragmatic" Ali Larijani, the speaker of parliament who helped orchestrate the crackdown on the 1999 student rebellion.

Revolutionary Iran hates its main enemies—America, Israel, and the anti-Shiite Wahhabi Saudi court—with a special, divinely sanctioned intensity dwarfing the class-based hostility that the vanguard of the proletariat had for capitalists. And the hard core among the regime's leaders—who have squeezed out of power just about anyone who could have worn a "moderate" label—revile Jews above all. Third World-friendly radical Marxism, which depicts Jews as the most nefarious members of the Western robber-baron class, provides half the fuel for the Iranian revolutionary mind. Classical Islamic thought, now given a nasty, modern anti-Semitic twist, provides the rest.

In the Koran, Jews are depicted as intelligent, well educated, and treasonous. The Prophet Muhammad's slaughter of the Jewish Banu Qurayza tribe, which occasionally caused moral indigestion and apologies among later Muslim commentators, serves as a leitmotif for contemporary radical Muslims, who often see Jews, as the Nazis once did, as innately and irreversibly evil. Modern Islamic fundamentalism has turned a scorching spotlight back on the faith's foundation, when Jews, as the Koran tells us, stood in the way of the prophet and his divine mission. The tolerant, sometimes even philo-Semitic, attitudes of the Ottoman Empire have been almost completely forgotten by Islam's modern militants. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini wrote in the foreword to his masterpiece on Islamic government, "The Islamic movement was afflicted by the Jews from its very beginnings, when they began their hostile activity by distorting the reputation of Islam, and by defaming and maligning it. This has continued to the present day."

The disciples of Khomeini grew to intellectual maturity in an age when Western anti-Semitism—in part thanks to Nazi propaganda in the Middle East during World War II and subsequent Muslim admirers of Hitler, both secular and fundamentalist—had married anti-Zionism in ways that might have made the young Khomeini recoil in disgust. In Iran among the hard core, an Islamist-Marxist-Nazi brew sustains the most vicious anti-Semitic—not just anti-Zionist—regime ever in the Muslim Middle East. (Saudi Arabia is a close but less threatening second.) In the Islamic Republic, state-sponsored anti-Semitism, for both popular and highbrow audiences, has become ubiquitous. Westerners need not know Persian to get an idea of how toxic the situation has become. The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) translates items of interest from the region's press which regularly illustrate the Jew-hatred coming from Tehran. MEMRI doesn't pretend to be comprehensive, but it provides an

inkling of how the disease has metastasized.

It is important to dwell on the matter of anti-Semitism in Iran and the Muslim Middle East since American and European officials and academics usually refrain from doing so. It is a complicated and invidious subject. In the decade that I served in the Central Intelligence Agency, I can recall only a few diplomatic or intelligence cables and reports even mentioning anti-Semitism among Muslims. Yet the disease permeated Sunni and Shiite fundamentalist thought, and it's only gotten worse since I left the agency in 1994. American officials and scholars like to wall the subject off, reluctantly touching it when discussing the Israeli-Palestinian imbroglio and suggesting that the issue will evanesce when the Israelis and Palestinians make peace. As the historian Bernard Lewis pointed out in 1986 in his seminal *Semites and Anti-Semites*, peace between the Arabs and the Israelis would surely help diminish the antagonism toward Israel and the Jews that exists in the Middle East, at least among Muslims who view the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation more or less as a political and geographical struggle between two peoples. But for those, like the Iranian hard core, who believe this is a match-up between God and the Devil, a peace process can ameliorate nothing.

What Lewis observed 25 years ago among the Arabs is truer among the Persians 31 years after the Islamic Revolution: "Muslim anti-Semitism is still something that comes from above, from the leadership, rather than from below, from the society." The average Iranian, including the average well-educated Iranian, who even under the shah was fairly likely to be obsessed with Jewish conspiracy, is free of the personal contempt for Jews that marks the classical European or American anti-Semite. The Green Movement even mocks the regime for its fixation on Israel and Palestine and Holocaust denial (which really means Holocaust approval). Young Iranians want to talk about Iran, not Palestine.

The average Iranian, however, controls neither his country's nuclear program nor the clandestine network Tehran has built up to support its ideological proxies. As for the average Israeli, it matters little to him if someone who is virulently anti-Zionist is not lethally anti-Semitic. The two are operationally indistinguishable. Either way, the targets are Israelis.

As Bret Stephens pointed out in *Commentary*, Iran's psychological state more closely resembles the militarist Japanese mindset in the 1930s—"a martyrdom-obsessed, non-Western culture with global ambitions"—than it does that of the Soviets of yesteryear, whose worst instincts were deterred at enormous cost. Japan made a series of gross, hubristic miscalculations—especially misjudging the United States—that led it into a world war that killed millions of its own people and destroyed the militarists' cherished way of life. But even the Japanese parallel doesn't quite capture revolutionary Iran's special animus toward Israel.

Rafsanjani, whom Washington foreign-policy types have usually viewed approvingly, gave a few speeches in 1983 and 1984 about the Jewish contribution to Western imperialism. He described the creation of Israel as "a united conspiracy against Islam" which the Jews still lead. Understanding the aggression and nefariousness of the United States, he said, isn't possible without first understanding the role of Jews

within America—their success at capitalism and their power within the media. The Iran-Iraq war, the most searing near-death experience for the founding fathers of the Iranian revolution, couldn't have happened without Jewish-controlled America giving the green light to Saddam and his financiers in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The Jews were thus responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iranians. For Rafsanjani, Jews have a dark, centripetal eminence. For Khamenei, a man of fewer words, it's much simpler and more explicitly religious. When he describes Israel as an "enemy of God," he means exactly that. His Revolutionary Guards continuously rail against nefarious Jewish power.

### *Khamenei run amok*

A nuclear arsenal would allow Khamenei much greater latitude in finding ways to make Israel bleed. Iran's actions against the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan have been pretty bold considering America could, if it chose, rain hell down on Iran for its complicity in the killing of hundreds of American soldiers. We have not done that because we have feared escalation into direct conflict with another Middle Eastern state. The Israelis, too, have failed so far to take on the Iranians with much gusto even though the Islamic Republic has done far more damage to the Jewish state via Iranian allied groups, weapons, and cash than has any Arab nation since 1973.

Imagine what Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guard Corps will think of the Americans, and especially the Israelis, if, after announcing repeatedly that an Iranian nuclear weapon is "unacceptable," they permit it. Israelis, who must live with the Middle East's merciless power politics, should expect considerable Iranian creativity. Terrorism is never static. Even suicide bombers, Iranian-made improvised explosive devices, and missiles can become passé. And as Khamenei and the Guard Corps become savage in suppressing dissent at home, we should expect them to become more violent abroad. The regime lives in fear of a "velvet revolution." It sees foreign powers—the United States, Israel, and some Europeans—as deeply complicit in the Green Movement (though, regrettably, none is). The odds are high that after the supreme leader and the Guards acquire a nuclear weapon, they will think of ways to get even. If Khamenei can kill and torture his way to more self-confidence, we may see a repeat of the 1990s, when the regime went on an overseas killing spree that culminated in the bombing of the American base at Khobar, Saudi Arabia, in 1996.

The key to stopping all of this is Khamenei. Like the former shah, he is the weak link in the regime. Once a relatively broad-based, consensual theocratic dictatorship run by Khomeini's lieutenants, the Islamic Republic today is an autocracy. The supreme leader's office has become a de facto shadow government, with bureaus that mirror the president's ministries. In matters of security and intelligence, Khamenei's men reign supreme. His arrogation of power has made the regime more fragile. Only someone of the supreme leader's short-sighted, insecure arrogance could turn most of the Islamic Republic's founding fathers into enemies of the state. Mir Hossein Mousavi, for instance, now leader of the Green Movement, was a loyal son of the regime who—if he'd been left unharassed during the 2009 election, if he'd not been personally belittled by Khamenei and told he was not really an acceptable candidate—probably would have proved a relatively uncontroversial president.

Mousavi might even have lost a fair election, given the status-loving conservatism of many Iranians.

Khamenei has now turned a man with an iron will into his sworn enemy. Worse, he's turned him into a democrat. The supreme leader's rash decision to throw the election to Ahmadinejad has also compromised all future elections. He has permanently destabilized the country. National and municipal elections—especially in the major cities—will now get postponed, perhaps indefinitely, or be so grossly controlled that they can no longer be viewed by the regime as a legitimating force.

And the supreme leader has regularly played musical chairs with the leadership of the Revolutionary Guards, purging those who rose to fame in the Iran-Iraq war and had respectful and affectionate connections to others in the republic's founding generation. Since June 12, 2009, he's alienated even more members of Iran's senior clergy, who've never been particularly fond of Khamenei, a junior cleric until his elevation to Khomeini's office. The use of rape by the regime to pacify the political opposition in the past year sent shockwaves through Iran's clergy, even though their institutional conservatism and government paychecks have inclined mullahs to avoid discussing the regime's worst abuses.

The Islamic Republic is not without ethics—it's not nearly as morally flexible as the Orwellian states of the former Soviet empire or the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein. Political-religious legitimacy really does matter in the country, and Khamenei in his paranoid quest to make himself the "shadow of God on earth" has thrown it away. He has countered his loss of legitimacy by massively increasing the size of the security forces. The once proud Revolutionary Guard Corps, whose ethos was built in combat with Baathist Iraq, has become more like a mafia, where senior members make fortunes and those below try to advance through the gravy train. Greed and envy are rotting the state's over-muscled internal defenses and making guardsmen, like the favorites of the late shah, the objects of Iran's still lively class-based anger. The supreme leader's hiring and firing practices within the corps and the outfit's evolving ethos make one question the spiritual solidity of the organization.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and others have described Iran as an emerging "military dictatorship" where "the space of decision making for the clerical and political leadership is shrinking." That might be news to Khamenei, who has allowed the corps to grow and had his way with its leadership, promoting men who profess unrivaled religious zeal. It is certainly possible that if Khamenei were to fall, a military dictatorship would follow. But such an "evolution" would place the Guards in ideological opposition to the entire clergy and everything that is Shiite in the republic's identity. If Khamenei's rule cracks, the corps, riven with rivalries, will probably crack with it.

### *Rock the system*

What the Israelis need to do is rock the system. Iran's nuclear-weapons program has

become the third pillar of Khamenei's theocracy (the other two being anti-Americanism and the veil). If the Israelis, whom the regime constantly asperses as Zionists ripe for extinction, can badly damage Iran's nuclear program, the regime will lose enormous face. Khamenei and Ahmadinejad have said repeatedly that the Israelis wouldn't dare strike the nation's nuclear program; if the Israelis do dare, it will be a stunning blow. And military defeats can be deadly for dictatorships—historically, there's nothing deadlier.

While there is no guarantee that an Israeli raid would cause sufficient shock to produce a fatal backlash against Khamenei and the senior leadership of the Guards, there is a chance it would, and nothing else on the horizon offers Israel better odds. Loyal members of Khamenei's entourage, like Speaker Larijani, publicly counseled Khamenei not to be too aggressive in the development of the nuclear program for fear of provoking an American military response. Rafsanjani warned the supreme leader and Ahmadinejad about their aggressiveness even more explicitly. (Those public admonitions ended, as did President Bush's threatening rhetoric, after the 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate asserted, with more confidence than information, that Tehran had stopped its weaponization program in 2003.) It's one thing to have the "Great Satan" lay waste your program; it's another thing entirely to have the "Little Satan" do what the senior leadership of the Revolutionary Guards said was impossible. At the very least, the Iranian left, right, and center would rise in umbrage against any Zionist aggression, and Khamenei's foes and the population as a whole would question the leadership of the men who provoked the Israelis, then couldn't stop them from blowing up the nuclear program that has taken Iran 20 years to construct.

Too much has been made in the West of the Iranian reflex to rally round the flag after an Israeli (or American) preventive strike. Iranians aren't nationalist automatons. Compared with Arabs and Turks, who lack an ancient cosmopolitan culture reinforcing their modern identity, Iranians don't have a jagged and brittle patriotism. They are an old and sophisticated people quite capable of holding multiple hatreds simultaneously in their minds. The Green Movement is an upwelling of 30 years of anger against theocracy. It won't go away because Israel bombs Iran's nuclear sites.

Iran's defeat in the Iran-Iraq war did not make Iranians rally to the regime. On the contrary, that defeat by Saddam Hussein helped to unleash an enormous wave of reflection and self-criticism. Without it, we likely would not have seen the rapid transformation of the Islamic Republic's religious and political culture—a second intellectual revolution, which created the Green Movement. After that transformation, we have a supreme leader whom millions loathe and even more distrust. If the Israelis can make Khamenei look pathetic (and Khamenei has a nearly flawless talent for doing the wrong thing at the wrong time), they can conceivably crack the regime. Jerusalem needs to put the supreme leader under tremendous pressure and see if he can hold it together.

Neither the Israelis nor anyone else need fear for the Green Movement. (Always skeptical of democratic movements among Muslims, most Israelis probably wrote it off as soon as it was born.) If Khamenei were so foolish as to arrest and kill Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, another Khomeini loyalist who has become a leader of the

Greens, he would create martyrs in a martyr-obsessed society. If he left them alone and the Israelis struck, they would rise in eloquent anger against the Israelis. Khamenei could never publicly try them for treason. Khamenei has been ordering his goons to rape and murder men and women who've dared to challenge his authority. Would he target still more Iranians for somehow abetting an Israeli bombing? This would only make the regime look more reprehensible in the eyes of the common faithful, on whom, ultimately, the supreme leader's power rests. Yet such repression becomes conceivable as Khamenei's exercise of power grows increasingly paranoid and prone to mistakes. In any case, Iran's pro-democracy dissident culture is here to stay. Regardless of what the Israelis do, it will continue to hunt for fissures in the police state.

And the other concerns about an Israeli bombing are no more persuasive. Hezbollah would undoubtedly unleash its missiles on Israel after a preventive strike. Its *raison d'être* is inextricably tied to war with Zion. It did not twice send terrorists all the way to South America to slaughter Jews to deter Israelis from nefarious activities in the Levant. Hezbollah does not train Hamas, which is pledged to seek Israel's destruction, because it is searching for leverage in negotiations. It did not make contact with al Qaeda because it wanted to improve its image with Sunni Lebanese. Right now, Israel has to deal with a Hezbollah backed by a nonnuclear Iran. Once the Islamic Republic goes nuclear, this relationship can't get easier. Israel's nuclear deterrent may hold back the worst that Iran could do—regardless of whether Israel strikes preemptively—but other horrific terrorist possibilities remain.

Hundreds of Israelis could die from Hezbollah's new and improved store of missiles. Israel might have to invade Lebanon again, which would cost more lives and certainly upset the "international community." These concerns have tormented a few Israeli prime ministers. But if nuclear weapons in the hands of Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards are an existential threat to the Jewish state—and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, like his predecessors, has said that they are—Jerusalem has little choice. Bombing is the only option that could likely alter the nuclear equation in Iran before Khamenei produces a weapon. The Obama administration might fume, but it is hard to imagine the president, given what he has said about the unacceptability of Iranian nukes, scolding Jerusalem long. He might personally agree with his one-time counsel, Jimmy Carter's national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, that Israel has become a pariah state, but politically this won't fly. The left wing of the Democratic party has been going south on the Jewish state for 30 years, but congressional Democrats, who've been pushing for new sanctions against Iran more aggressively than the White House, are not that far gone. By and large, the Republican party would hold behind the Israelis.

The Israelis are well aware of the United States' global security interests. The American presence in Iraq and Afghanistan figures in any Israeli discussion of striking Iran. What should have been a strategic asset for the United States has become a liability since the Americans made it clear that our primary interest from

the moment we arrived in the region was leaving. The Iranians aren't stupid: If we tell them that we fear for our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, Revolutionary Guard Corps officers will give us reason to fear.

American fear of Iranian capabilities in Iraq and Afghanistan has been exaggerated. The Americans are leaving Iraq; within a year, most of our troops are due to be gone. This might not be the best thing for the long-term health of Iraqi democracy, but President Obama appears more determined to exit than to ensure that Iraqi governance doesn't fall apart. The Shiite Arabs now lead Iraq. Is the supreme leader of Shiite Iran really going to wage war on the Iraqi Shia? Khamenei has considerable difficulty with his own clergy. Is he now going to provoke the Iranian-born Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the preeminent divine of Iraq and the most popular ayatollah among Iranians? Is he going to upset the Iraqi status quo that has mostly been built by the blood, sweat, and tears of the country's Shiites, on whom Iran depends for influence in Iraq?

If Khamenei is so foolish as to antagonize the Iraqi Shia, by all means let him. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same is true in Afghanistan. The Iranians have no reliable proxies there: The Hazara, although Shiite, have never been close to Persians, the Sunni Tajiks are even less affectionate, and the Uzbeks carry no one's water. Iran could ship more improvised explosive devices to the Afghan Pashtun Taliban, but eventually anti-Taliban sentiment in Iran and in Afghanistan would get in their way. If the Iranians tried their mightiest, they could give us only a small headache compared with the migraine we've already got courtesy of the Pakistanis, who are intimately tied to Afghanistan's Taliban. And the Israelis know the U.S. Navy has no fear of Tehran's closing the Strait of Hormuz. If Khamenei has a death-wish, he'll let the Revolutionary Guards mine the strait, the entrance to the Persian Gulf: It might be the only thing that would push President Obama to strike Iran militarily. Such an escalation could quickly leave Khamenei with no navy, air force, and army. The Israelis have to be praying that the supreme leader will be this addle-headed.

It is entirely possible that Khamenei would use terrorism against the United States after an Israeli strike. That is one of the supreme leader's preferred methods of state action, which is why he should not be permitted a nuclear weapon. The correct response for the United States is to credibly threaten vengeance. President Obama might be obliged to make such a threat immediately after an Israeli surprise attack; whether the Iranians would believe it, given America's record, is more difficult to assess.

The great merit of the Bush and Obama administrations' efforts to engage Iran in nuclear negotiations is that they have transformed the discussion about the Islamic Republic's nuclear program. The West bent over backwards to be nice to Tehran, to extend carrots rather than sticks. The slow ramping up of Western sanctions has also forced all concerned to be more explicit about the Iranian menace. Democrats in Congress, who are backing tougher sanctions than the White House wants, are mentally in a different galaxy than they were under President Bush. If the Israelis bomb now, American public opinion will probably be with them. Perhaps decisively so.

The same is true, to a much lesser extent, of opinion in Europe. Starting in 2003, the European Union made a major effort to negotiate with Tehran. For the French, Germans, and British—the “EU-3”—it’s been an unsatisfying exercise, increasing distaste for the Iranian regime. Since June 12, 2009, the Europeans—more than the Americans—have watched on TV Khamenei’s attack on the Green Movement. Human rights in Iran is an issue in Europe, especially Germany, and especially on the left. Tehran’s representatives in Europe have also done their part in disturbing the diplomatic politesse that Europe’s political elites live and breathe. After Ahmadinejad’s election in 2005, Iran’s ambassadors to Portugal and Poland, for example, publicly ruminated on the practical impossibilities of the “Final Solution.” In 2006 Warsaw’s ministry of foreign affairs had to threaten to declare the Iranian ambassador persona non grata if he followed through on his publicly expressed wish to visit Auschwitz to measure the ovens so he could prove that genocide could not have happened there.

European sentiment remains overwhelmingly opposed to the use of force in foreign affairs, and many Europeans have developed an ugly anti-Israeli reflex. An inclination to excuse or ignore Arab violence toward Israel while excoriating any lethal (usually labeled “disproportionate”) Israeli response is still there, as witnessed recently with the Turkish-led, pro-Hamas, Gaza-bound flotilla. But the Europeans also take an increasingly dim view of Iran. Khamenei’s decision to tap Ahmadinejad for president in 2009, his post-June 12 crackdown, and the European political elite’s long and frustrating experience with the supreme leader’s minions have dispelled the sympathy Iran enjoyed under Khatami, when Europeans blamed every setback on George W. Bush.

No doubt many Europeans will rise in high dudgeon if the Israelis attack. Conceivably, the Germans will lead a charge to punish the Israelis through EU economic sanctions, though it’s doubtful the necessary consensus could be built. Even the Austrians, who’ve never seen an Iranian sanction they liked, might balk at imposing sanctions on the Jewish state for militarily striking a Holocaust-denying Islamist autocracy. The Israeli left might have to abandon its dream of being fully accepted in the salons of the Old World, but that is a sacrifice that most members of the Labor party, which seems only a bit less disposed to bombing Iran than the right-wing Likud, are probably willing to make.

### *Too little too late*

It is possible the Israelis have waited too long to strike. Military action should make a strategic difference. If the Israelis (or, better, the Americans under President Bush) had struck Iran’s principal nuclear facilities in 2003 and killed many of the scientists and technical support staff, Khamenei’s nuclear program likely would have taken years, even decades, to recover. Now, by contrast, the Iranians may be sufficiently advanced in uranium enrichment, trigger mechanisms, and warhead design that they could build a device quickly after an Israeli raid, and the attack would have accomplished little. Khamenei could emerge from the confrontation stronger.

A spate of Iranian defections to the West (including Ali Reza Asgari, a former Revolutionary Guard commander, in 2007, the somewhat bizarre case of the nuclear scientist Shahram Amiri in 2009, and the country's former nuclear negotiator with the EU, Hossein Moussavian, in 2010) may have allowed the Israelis and other Westerners a clearer picture of how advanced Tehran's nuclear-weapons program is. If we're not at the end of the road, then the Israelis probably should waste no more time. Khamenei is still weak. He's more paranoid than he's ever been. The odds of his making uncorrectable mistakes are much better than before. Any Israeli raid that could knock out a sizable part of Iran's nuclear program would change the dynamic inside Iran and throughout the Middle East. There is a chance that it would spare the Israelis the awful, likely possibility that other Middle Eastern states—especially the Saudis, Iran's arch-religious rival—would go nuclear in response to a Persian bomb. The Israelis know that many in the Sunni Arab world would be enormously relieved if the Israelis did what the Americans have declined to take on. The United Arab Emirates' ambassador to the United States recently revealed what is likely a Sunni Arab consensus: Bombing Iran might be bad; allowing Khamenei to have a nuke would be worse.

Unless Jerusalem bombs, the Israelis will soon be confronting a situation without historical parallel. The Islamic Republic currently has 8,528 uranium-enrichment centrifuges installed at the Natanz facility. Almost 4,000 of these are operational. A 3,000-centrifuge cascade could produce fuel for one warhead in 271 days. Natanz is designed to hold 50,000 centrifuges, which could produce enough fuel for one warhead every 16 days. Ignoring the possibility that Khamenei's nuclear experts will transfer Natanz's cascading centrifuges to covert facilities once they figure out how to maintain and array them (hence the urgent need to blow up the facility), uranium production will soon create a command-and-control nightmare. Envision nuclear warheads on missiles and on planes, dispersed throughout Iran to ensure that an American or Israeli first strike couldn't take them out. Now focus on the fact that the Revolutionary Guards Corps will have possession of these weapons. Khamenei isn't likely to give command-and-control to "moderate" guardsmen; he'll likely give it to the folks he trusts most—a nuclear version of the Quds Force, the expeditionary terrorist-and-assassination unit within the Corps that does most of the regime's really dirty work and has direct access to the supreme leader.

We're not talking about the stolid (but at times dangerously foolish) Pakistani Army controlling nuclear weapons; we're talking about folks who've maintained terrorist liaison relationships with most of the Middle East's radical Muslim groups. It's entirely possible that even with Khamenei in control, an Iranian atomic stockpile could lose nukes to dissenting voices within the Guards who have their own ideological agendas. Now imagine the ailing Khamenei is dead, the Guard Corps has several dozen nuclear devices in its "possession," and the country is in some political chaos as power centers, within the clergy and the Corps, start competing against each other. The Green Movement, too, will probably rise in force. The whole political structure could collapse or the most radical could fight their way to the top—all parties trying to get their hands on the nukes. Since there is no longer a politburo in Iran to keep control (Khamenei gutted it when he downed his peers and competitors), this could get messy quickly.

In the best case scenario, if things were just “normal” in Tehran, Israel would likely be confronting Cuban Missile Crisis-style brinkmanship on a routine basis. Any halfway successful Israeli raid could transform the Western approach to the Islamic Republic. An Israeli strike could finally prompt the Western powers to think in concrete terms about what it would mean to allow the Revolutionary Guard Corps nukes.

Without a raid, if the Iranians get the bomb, Europe’s appeasement reflex will kick in and the EU sanctions regime will collapse, leaving the Americans alone to contain the Islamic Republic. Most of the Gulf Arabs will probably kowtow to Persia, having more fear of Iran than confidence in the defensive assurances of the United States. And Sunni Arabs who don’t view an Iranian bomb as a plus for the Muslim world will, at daunting speed, become much more interested in “nuclear energy”; the Saudis, who likely helped Islamabad go nuclear, will just call in their chits with the Pakistani military.

So then, does the Israeli air force think it can do it? Historically, Israeli politicians have taken the assessments of their air force as canonical. If the air command believes it can, will Bibi Netanyahu and his cabinet proceed with preemption, which has, most Israelis will tell you, repeatedly saved the Jewish state from terrible situations?

The *Atlantic’s* Jeffrey Goldberg, an acute observer of the Israeli prime minister, holds that Netanyahu will favor a strike if he has no other serious option. And Israelis—right and left—are deeply skeptical that a sanctions regime that does not shut down the Iranian oil and gas sector has any utility whatsoever in halting the nuclear program. The sanctions effort led by Treasury undersecretary Stuart Levey and congressional Democrats has certainly damaged Iran’s economy and slowed down the nuclear program, as Ali Akbar Salehi, the head of Iran’s Atomic Energy Organization, in a rare moment of honesty recently confessed. These sanctions are definitely beginning to sting Iran’s energy sector. But the Israelis have history on their side when they express their profound skepticism about the will of the “international community” to use sanctions decisively against Tehran. Contrary to what Senator Lindsey Graham said recently in Israel—“there’s many options still available to us” to stop the Iranian nuclear program—there has always, really, been only one peaceful way: paralyzing sanctions against Iran’s oil and gas industry. Neither President Obama, nor most Europeans, seem ready to hit so forcefully the Islamic Republic.

For Netanyahu, the Iranian-nuke question touches the core of his own Israeli identity—what he was taught by his historian father, whose specialty, the Jews of Spain, is a tragic saga of helplessness, flight, and conversion, and what he learned from the death of his elder brother, the only commando killed in the Entebbe raid to free Israeli hostages in 1976. Most Washington foreign-policy commentators just don’t believe the Jewish state will strike because of the limitations of Israel’s airpower. But they are probably underestimating Netanyahu personally and the Israeli-Jewish reflex to never again be passive in the face of an existential danger.

Israeli hawks may be wrong about what their air force can do, but they express

sentiments—where there is a will, there is a way—that most Israelis probably still share. Which brings us to the current minister of defense and leader of the Labor party, Ehud Barak. At times he sounds as hawkish as Netanyahu; at other times, he seems almost willing to live with an Iranian nuclear weapon. The current coalition government couldn't attack Iran without Barak's approval. So, the whole discussion may boil down to this: Will Israel's defense minister remain calm and "strategically patient," putting his faith in Israel's atomic arsenal, in the nuclear sobriety of Ali Khamenei and his Guards, and in the awe that Barack Obama's America inspires in the Middle East? Or will he decide that a military strike is the only sound response to an existential danger?

*Reuel Marc Gerecht is a contributing editor to The Weekly Standard and a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.*

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