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An Israeli Airstrike on Iran: Calculus and Consequences

Introduction

One of the most difficult strategic issues facing the U.S. and Israel is the threat of a nuclear armed Iran. Despite years of diplomacy, three rounds of economic sanctions, and plenty of grandstanding rhetoric, the Iranians appear to be progressing in their pursuit of building a nuclear weapon.¹ This presents American and Israeli strategists with a daunting task: how to deter this development. Among the alternatives discussed is a preemptive strike by the U.S. or Israel on Iranian nuclear facilities.

In view of the importance of this issue, the National Strategy Forum (NSF) recently convened a group of national security experts to discuss the likelihood and probable consequences of an Israeli airstrike on Iran's nuclear facilities.

Method

The method of discussion used decision software currently employed by the U.S. Department of Defense and the business community called Risky Decision Technology (RDT).² The software aggregates group preferences for an array of outcomes according to discrete factors and issues. In particular, the RDT software highlights the most important issues of group agreement and disagreement.

In the Israeli strike scenario, the software compared eight experts' opinions on seventeen factors related to the primary research question, "Will Israel pursue a precision strike against Iran's nuclear facilities in an attempt to delay progress towards a nuclear weapon?" The simulation constrained the exercise with a number of assumptions, the most important of which include: the current economic sanctions and diplomatic initiatives are unlikely to change Iran's course; Iran could have enough fissile material by March 2011 to build a nuclear weapon; Saudi Arabia does

¹ The earliest point at which Iran would have enough fissile nuclear material to build a bomb is March 2011.

However, it is unclear how advanced Iran's bomb-making technology is in reality, and we note the fissile material alone is not enough to build a weapon.

² For more information on the RDT software, please visit the website here: www.decision-command.com

not want an Iranian bomb; the U.S. has a commitment to non-proliferation; and the Israeli and U.S. militaries are capable of launching precision airstrikes over great distances with ground penetrating munitions.

The exercise asked seventeen strategic questions that related to whether Israel would or would not launch a preemptive airstrike. In addition to Israel's strategic calculation, the questions were also designed to determine the importance of U.S. preferences to Israel's strategic calculation on whether or not to strike.³ For example, the U.S. has national security interests in the Middle East, but a mix of domestic and foreign policy considerations may prevent the U.S. from becoming militarily involved against Iran or even in tacitly supporting an Israeli air strike. The goal of this exercise was to refine the most important strategic issues facing the U.S. and Israel as they craft their strategy and tactics.

The conclusions of our exercise should not be regarded as definitive, of course, but rather as suggestive of a possible course of events. Such an exercise is suggestive rather than conclusive, and is intended to facilitate critical thinking.

Results

There was consensus that—barring a diplomatic breakthrough—Israel would be likely to strike Iran's nuclear weapons development facilities to delay their nuclear program. However, the strategic scenario was nuanced and required discussion of a wide range of other related issues. These factors are discussed below.

Israel's Perceptions

The major factors driving Israel's strategic calculation are the perceived existential threat from an Iranian nuclear weapon and the uncertain prospect of mutually assured destruction (MAD) as a deterrent to Iran. The group agreed that while Israel may respond rationally to MAD, Iran has not conveyed rational deterrence behavior. On the contrary, Iran has indulged in vitriolic anti-Israeli rhetoric and promised to wipe Israel off of the map. In addition, the public statements of the ruling clerics indicate that the Iranian regime would be willing to trade Iranian lives for the annihilation of Israel. Even if the statements are merely rhetorical or based on other political considerations, Israel is especially vulnerable because of its small size and limited number of very high value targets and is likely to take such statements seriously.

³ The software permitted the impact of each question to be clearly exposed. Moreover, the influence of any individual question on the conclusion could be easily examined. For example, how important is an assumption, and what is the impact if that assumption is changed? Particularly in dynamic situations, the sensitivity of information can be valuable to decision-making. Exploring the importance of any particular factor or combination of factors was made considerably easier due to the RDT software. If the given factor changed or did not occur, one could immediately check the impact of that change on the result. Overall, the RDT software allowed a the compilation of a large groups' opinions to be easily assimilated into a cohesive decision framework, thereby making a group decision on the research question to be easily identified.

Middle East Balance of Power

An Iranian nuclear weapon would fundamentally shift the balance of power in the Middle East. Moreover, a shift in the balance of power in the Middle East would incline the U.S. and (possibly) Saudi Arabia to support an Israeli attack, if not publicly then privately. Such tacit support would increase the likelihood on an Israeli attack.

Hamas and Hezbollah

Hamas and Hezbollah are supportive of the Iranian government—from which they get a great deal of support—and might well launch attacks on Israel in the event of any Israeli attack on Iran. However, the physical threat from Hamas and Hezbollah rockets fired into Israel would not be sufficient to sway Israel's strategic calculus towards Iran. Moreover, because this threat is expected, Israel will view this issue as manageable, and would not be dissuaded from striking Iran.

The Strait of Hormuz

Any military action taken against Iran was assumed to cause a temporary disruption in the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf, resulting in a spike in the price of oil. The group noted that there would be considerable diplomatic and public backlash against the attacker. However, since an oil spike is an assumed and expected outcome, Israel is unlikely to feel constrained in its actions because the economic consequences are predictable and preparations can be made in advance to ameliorate long term damage. Any action resulting in the diminution of the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf would likely compel the U.S. to respond militarily to secure its national interests. Because the U.S. would be likely to respond to such a disruption, the group determined that this factor would not dissuade Israel from pursuing a strike on Iran. Although U.S. policy is to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, it is uncertain whether they would endorse or even tacitly approve an Israeli air strike.

Iranian Response to a Strike: Domestic and International Consequences

Iran has several ways in which to respond to an attack on their nuclear facilities. First, Iran would be expected to neutralize domestic opposition groups and solidify the clerical political base. There would be a public inclination to “rally around the flag.” Second, Iran would attempt to inflame the broader Islamic community and condemn Israel. Third, Iran would activate proxy militias in Lebanon, Palestine, Kuwait, and Bahrain. Fourth, Iran would attempt to curtail the flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz.

There was disagreement as to what affect a strike would have on the stability of Iran's regime. A key question was raised: what is the U.S. and Israel's objective for Iran's political status? Is the goal regime change, or a stable and rational Iranian government? Are these goals short term or long term? The Iranian public's predilection to “rally around the flag” would be a deterrent to regime change objectives. However, the group determined that regime change variables were not critical to the Israeli strike calculation—the existential threat would overrule regime change considerations in the short term.

The U.S. Role

An important unknown issue was the role that the U.S. would play in Israel's strategic calculation. The issue was whether Israel could act alone without U.S. support (tacit or public), and whether or not the U.S. would be willing to become involved (either preemptively or *post hoc*) with a military operation to open the Strait of Hormuz. The discussion concluded several points about the likely U.S. role *vis a vis* an Israeli airstrike.

First, because of the existential threat perceived by Israel, the U.S. strategic calculation and potential military involvement is not the primary issue for Israel. Essentially, the U.S. strategic calculation is subordinate to the Israeli calculation.

Second, the U.S. has a vital national security interest in the Strait of Hormuz. A very likely Iranian response to an attack is to disrupt the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf. The U.S. cannot abide an oil disruption, and the pressure from the domestic and international community would compel the U.S. to respond with military action to restore the flow of oil. Consequently, the U.S. is likely to be drawn into a well-defined *post hoc* military operation. Given that Israel can anticipate some sort of U.S. military involvement after an attack, Israel will be emboldened to strike Iran.

Third, U.S. domestic politics are a major impediment to U.S. involvement in an Iranian military operation. With military resources already stretched and a weak economic recovery, convincing the American public will be very difficult. If, however, Iran threatens U.S. economic interests in the Persian Gulf, the domestic political calculation would change and the possibility of American involvement increases. Given American domestic impediments to action, Israel will feel the need to strike even if the American public opposes involvement (because Israel could not count on the U.S. striking Iran first). In addition, because the U.S. would likely be compelled to react militarily to an economic security threat, and Israel can plan on a military response to Iranian reprisals in the Persian Gulf, Israel would be emboldened to strike.

Conclusions and Implications

The likelihood of an Israeli attack, coupled with an Iranian reprisal against oil flow in the Persian Gulf, argues for the inclusion of several U.S. strategic objectives in this scenario.

First, regime change in Iran is both an Israeli and U.S. foreign policy priority, although it is clearly subordinate in Israeli minds to the imminent nuclear threat. There is also a possibility that an attack on Iran could solidify nationalism among the moderate Iranian public, in effect rallying them to the clerical leadership and setting back this objective. This is a plausible outcome, but it is unclear how much this potential setback will affect U.S. and Israeli strategic strike calculations.

U.S. public diplomacy should be re-invigorated. If an attack occurs, the Iranian public will look for a culprit to blame, whether it is the Iranian government or the U.S. and Israel. Thus, the public diplomacy message should argue to the Iranian public that their regime's policies may

force the hand of the international community to strike back. The message should indicate that multilateral economic sanctions—which have hurt the pocketbooks of Iranian citizens—have not been enough to dissuade the regime from its inflammatory rhetoric aimed at Israel and the West and have not slowed Iranian nuclear progress. The message should clearly state that an attack on Iran’s nuclear assets would inevitably lead to civilian collateral damage, which the U.S. and Israel want to avoid.

Second, Iran’s nuclear proliferation is a security risk to the international community and should be a main priority of U.S. foreign policy efforts. The Obama administration has added the new Israel-Palestine peace talks to its already crowded foreign policy agenda. Some would argue that eliminating the Israel-Palestinian conflict from the Middle East will clear the way for greater multilateral efforts against Iran. This is certainly a worthy goal. Others would argue that the historical track record on these talks are abysmal, and that it is unclear if any real progress can be made before Iran crosses the threshold of nuclear weapons development. The U.S. should reconsider its focus on Middle East foreign policy priorities and ensure that its crowded agenda is not minimizing the effectiveness of its Iran strategy.

Third, the U.S. public may not support additional U.S. military engagement in the near-term. If, however, there is an Israeli airstrike, the likely consequence would be that Iran would attempt to close the Strait of Hormuz. This would require limited U.S. military action to secure U.S. interests, and it is likely that this intervention would be supported by the U.S. public. The communication to the American public should be immediate and clear. If the administration tacitly supports an Israeli air strike on Iran, the domestic explanation needs to be crafted to clarify the intent (protecting U.S. interests) and means (limited military operations).