Possibility and Implications of an Israeli Strike on Iranian Nuclear Installations

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POSSIBILITY AND IMPLICATIONS OF AN ISRAELI STRIKE ON IRANIAN NUCLEAR INSTALLATIONS

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Abstract

Iran is at the centre of the international diplomatic storm over its nuclear programme. Lot of scepticism exists over Iranian nuclear programme which is accused of in violation to NPT by the western countries. Iran, on the other hand, denies these allegations and asserts for its nuclear rights for peaceful purposes. There is a difference of opinion in dealing with Iran between the US and the Europeans, as the US is willing to use military option, whereas Europeans seek for a diplomatic solution. But with the passage of time, the US problems are compounding due to destabilizing situation in Middle East, Iraq and Afghanistan beside the economy which is in doldrums. Under these circumstances, a US strike on Iran is less likely however, regardless of the US problems, Israel which considers Iran as an existential threat, may not hesitate in taking such an action if it gets convinced that Iran is about to cross nuclear threshold. Such a strike will have devastating implications for the region and Pakistan which warrants a critical analysis.

Introduction

Since last decade or so, the global politics have seen dramatic changes which had a profound impact on the global security paradigm. The invasion of Iraq and rise of militant groups in Muslim world has terrified the western world, and all those countries posing a challenge to the western domination and hegemony, are perceived as a potential threat by the West. Since the Iranian revolution, Iran has been generally viewed by the West, as a country completely out of step with the modern liberal and secular values, which remains as hallmark of western universal model of “Liberal Democracy”, and thus in this backdrop, possession of nuclear
weapons by Iran is considered as a threat to global peace and security. Iran has never kept its intentions hidden towards Israel, resultantly, Israel has also publically announced that it will not accept a nuclear Iran and thus may launch a pre-emptive strike before Iran actually acquires a nuclear weapon capability as has been witnessed in case of Iraq and Syria.

The debate in the United States (US) on dealing with Iran, amid Iraq and Afghanistan experience, has been a cause of division amongst neo-cons and democrats. Democrats seem more inclined towards finding a solution to Iranian problem through diplomacy or sanctions, while neo-cons have been advocating a military solution to the problem in case diplomacy fails. Israel on the other hand is not ready to accept any nuclear armed Arab state in the Middle East including Iran, even if means a major military confrontation or a unilateral strike over Iran. Therefore, the probability of Israel launching a pre-emptive strike against Iranian nuclear sites some time in the future, either with or without American support, appears to be high and thus warrants an in depth analysis.

Aim

The aim of this research is to evaluate the possibilities of an Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear installations and its probable implications on Pakistan and the region.

Iranian Nuclear Programme – A Brief Overview

The Iranian nuclear programme dates back to 1959 once it purchased a Nuclear Research Reactor from the US to be installed in Tehran. The Shah’s ambitious plan to built 23 nuclear reactors over a span of 30 years was never considered either a threat or an attempt to develop nuclear weapons by the West firstly, because Iran didn’t possess the expertise and desire in the requisite field and secondly, it was a close ally of the West. The purpose of these reactors was to possess an alternative source of energy. To assure the world community of its peaceful pursuit, Iran signed Nuclear Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968 and ratified it in 1970 which
encouraged not only the US, but also Germany, France, Sweden and other European countries to assist Iran in developing its Uranium enrichment and nuclear fuel production capabilities. However, in 1979, the political/security situation changed and Iranian nuclear program came to a halt due to Islamic Revolution and Iran-Iraq war. In 1982, Iranian regime decided to re-institutionalize its nuclear program fissile material production having dual usage. Iran formally resumed its nuclear program in 1991 with the Chinese and Russian assistance but by mid 90’s, the US and other Europeans countries started alleging that Iran is not meeting its obligations under the NPT Iran however denied these assertions.

Iran continued to expand and disperse its nuclear program till August 2002, when a dissident Iranian group, National Council of Resistance on Iran (NCRI), revealed information regarding its nuclear facilities at Natanz and Arak, which were kept hidden from IAEA. As a result, under international pressure, Iran had to sign an additional protocol in September 2003 which obliged Iran of granting further access to IAEA to its nuclear sites, suspending Uranium enrichment and Plutonium separation experiments. However, with Ahmadinejad becoming President, Iran announced resumption of its enrichment activities as permitted under the NPT in February 2006. Since then, Iranian nuclear program is at the centre stage of the world politics and controversies despite the US National Intelligence Estimates of 2007 and 2010 asserting that Iranian weapons related program has been halted since 2003 and the earliest possible date by which Iran would have technical capability to produce enough Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) for a nuclear device, is by 2015. After Iran announced that it has started development works in order to enrich Uranium at 20 percent, United Nations Security Council (UNSC) imposed sanctions against Iran in June 2010 for the fourth time since 2003.

It is estimated that Iran has constructed over 22 known nuclear facilities all across the country. However, facilities which are considered critical nodes in Iran’s nuclear
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infrastructure includes, Nuclear Research Centre and Uranium Conversion Facility at Esfahan, Uranium Enrichment Facilities at Natanz and Qom and Heavy Water and Future Plutonium production Centre at Arak. Some other nuclear facilities include Nuclear Research Centre at Tehran (apparently dismantled in 2003), Light Water Reactor at Bushehr, Uranium milling plant at Yazd and Uranium extracting mines at Saghand, Narigan and Zarigan.

Threat Perceptions of West and its Allies Regarding Iran

Since the last five years or so, Iranian nuclear program is at the centre of the world politics. Not only Israel has been issuing threats from time to time but the Europeans and Americans have also been showing their concerns on the issue. Some Europeans sources assert that their apprehensions regarding nuclear weapons technology are not Iran specific and rather are against all new acquisition efforts. Although, there is a difference regarding the European and the American approach to tackle the Iranian issue, as the former prefer diplomacy while the later stress on coercive measures including a military option, in case diplomacy and sanctions fail to deter Iran, despite realizing that the situation in Middle East after such a strike would be extremely difficult to handle. Still, it is widely believed that in case of an American or Israeli pre-emptive strike on Iran, there would be hardly any opposition from the European governments.

Other regional states like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Egypt, UAE, Jordan and Oman are equally apprehensive of a nuclear armed Iran as of the West, not only due to Shiite-Sunni rift, but also in the larger context of changing power balances which may lead to nuclear arms race in the region. However, they are also fearful of the consequences of a military strike on Iran. There were also rumours that Saudis have given a silent approval to Israel for using its airspace to attack Iranian nuclear installations. It can be best concluded that there exist a silent conformity
amongst the Europeans, Arabs and the Americans, that Iran must be prevented from becoming a nuclear state and if diplomacy fails, other options like sanctions or even a military strike should be used to bar Iran from achieving nuclear weapon capability. However, Europeans in real sense don’t perceive a direct threat from a nuclear Iran and rather are more concerned of the prospects of an Israeli-Iran or US-Iran confrontation which may destabilize the region and disrupt the oil supplies. In addition, they also believe that if Iran becomes nuclear, not only militant organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas would become more aggressive, influential and strong, thus posing greater risks for Israel’s security, but any conventional conflict between Israel and either of the Groups might acquire a nuclear dimension.

The Israeli Equation

Israel adds a very different dimension to the conflict. Since the election of Ahmadinejad to the seat of President, Iran and Israel are in direct confrontational mode. Rhetorical and historical statements given by President Ahmadinejad like “Israel will be wiped off the world map” and “Holocaust Myth” have been taken at the face value by Israel, terming these to be an existential threat. Due to its size and demography, Israel is a “one bomb state,” meaning that even if one nuclear bomb drops on Israel, it would cease to exist. Israel affirms the policy of “Never Again” on holocaust which provides the basis for any pre-emption strike on perceived threat to Israel’s security. Some western analysts believe that diplomatic pressures, covert intelligence operations, sanctions and computer malware attacks like Stuxnet, can’t restrain Iranian nuclear ambitions except for causing a temporary slowdown. Therefore, for most Israeli politicians, the question is not that Israel should launch pre-emptive strikes against Iranian nuclear installations, when and how it should be done. Rather Israeli leaders argue that they can’t afford to remain quiet and take measures only when Iran has already hit Tel Aviv with nuclear weapons. A nuclear Iran armed with ballistic missiles, is such a dangerous phenomenon which Israel can’t afford to ignore. They are convinced, if Saddam
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Hussain had the access to WMDs during the first Gulf war, he definitely would have used them against Israel, and thus Israel can’t let Iranians to have this capability with their long range missiles capable of hitting Israel. However, Israel has assured Americans that they will never attack alone until and unless they feel that they have been abandoned and left at their own. Moreover, Israel also believes that the time to act might be approaching sooner rather than later. The Israeli military commanders are also confident that despite this being a difficult task, air strikes can still be executed with deliberated planning and rehearsals. The largest ever civil defence exercise conducted in June 2009 was aimed to rehearse the worst case scenario against simultaneous attacks from Hezbollah, Hamas, Syria and Iran.

Options on the Table and Possibility of a Strike

The policy makers in Washington and EU capitals, are working on a timeline to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons as follow:

- **Diplomacy and Dialogue:** The main focus of world is on finding a diplomatic solution to the issue, and for this purpose, mainly EU-3 (Germany, France and Britain), IAEA and few other regional countries like Turkey, China, Brazil and Russia are trying hard to convince Iran that it doesn’t face sufficient threat to pursue its nuclear program and thus it must follow the IAEA safeguards. However, Iran has categorically made it clear that it has no intent to pursue for a weapon grade nuclear program, and Tehran has a peaceful purpose which the West is not ready to believe. Therefore, this perceptive difference is not likely to lead to any breakthrough in the deadlock sooner or later.

- **Incentives and Trade:** Offering security assurances, incentives and increasing trade is yet another policy being pursued by the west, however, Iran does not believe in vague security assurances and incentives of the West primarily due to the reason that the West has
double standards, and second, they can always turn back on their promises without any threat of punitive measures as was witnessed while making the case for invasion of Iraq. Moreover, Iran also considers that any major change in international scenario can force the West to turn away from its commitments as was the case after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, which left Iran at its own, and thus had to pursue a clandestine nuclear program. The Israel lobby and the neo-conservatives at the Capitol Hill, strongly oppose diplomatic and trade relations with Iran. Therefore, any diplomatic breakthrough between the US and Iran, in near future is inconceivable. However, despite this opposition, according to the US Census Bureau, American exports to Iran reached 683 million dollars in 2008 and 280 million dollars in 2009, but it is highly unlikely that any increase in trade or incentives would convince Iran to dump its nationalistic sovereign aspirations on nuclear issue, in order to comply with the Western demands on its nuclear program.

- **Regime Change:** Most agree that toppling of Iran’s nationalistic Prime minister, Muhammad Mossadeq, by the CIA was an unwise thing to do which ultimately paved the way for the religious theocracy in Iran. The regime change aspirations of the US in Iran are still considered as to be the major policy options prior to resorting to military strike, but the debate still goes on how it can be done and will it be possible in the near future, especially after the Iranian regime successfully put an end to the uprisings after the election controversy in 2009.

**Sanctions, Containment and Isolation**

Majority of the US policy makers agree that a mix of sanctions and diplomacy is the way forward, which would pressurize the Iranian regime to come to negotiation table or may even facilitate the conditions for regime change due to internal pressures. However, the Iranian regime has shown
its commitment and will that no amount of foreign pressure would force Iran to abandon its right over peaceful pursuit of nuclear program. It is unlikely that in the near future, Iran would abandon its nuclear activities due to fear of sanctions or international isolation, especially in view of the Chinese and Russians reluctance to support an all out containment or sanctions on Iran.40

**Deterrence**

In a worst case scenario for Israel and the US, if Iran ultimately seeks a nuclear capability, the US would like to adopt a policy of deterrence either by employing a missile defence shield in Europe and countries of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which it is in process of deploying, or by taking Israel under its nuclear protective shield,41 a shield which the US has publicly proclaimed but has not yet become a formal policy matter due to Israeli reluctance.42 Although, there are visible indications that the US would continue to lead a coalition to disarm Iran of its nuclear status, through wide range of diplomatic and coercive measures however, things may not go as per American plans. According to some analysts, the present Iranian regime has some different aspirations as President Ahmedinejad has a messianic mission to destroy Israel and facilitate to bring an apocalypse upon the world, which even Israeli Prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu has spoken of while giving interviews to some news reporters.43 According to these writers and analysts, President Ahmedinejad believes in the promised awaited leader Mahdi, who would appear in the times of great turbulence and injustices. Thus in his perception, the calls for nuclear rights and wiping Israel off the map would ultimately create the desired level of turmoil and conditions which would facilitate the return of the Mahdi who would spread justice and raise the Iranian stature in the world politics.44

**Pre-emptive Strike**

The ultimate and final option to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons is a pre-emptive strike by Israel, possibly assisted by the US. With the help of ongoing media
blitz, such an attack is becoming more plausible by each passing day as more consensuses is developing in domestic and political circles of the West that Iranian regime must be prevented from acquiring nuclear status. A similar smearing campaign was also witnessed before the invasion of Iraq while most of the European countries wanted to give more chance to the weapons inspectors. The US however, due to economic worries and fear of overstretched its military, might not opt for a military strike in the near future. Most Americans analysts, after the Afghan and Iraqi experience, are wary of the fact that such a strike would be costly, counterproductive and full of risks, as it would not only fail to completely destroy Iran’s nuclear capability but would also unleash a rein of terror against American interests around the globe beside providing Iran with a moral superiority to pursue its program. Israelis on the other hand are however convinced that even if the US restraints, Israel will have to act, even unilaterally, before Iran actually possesses a nuclear device. After the recent uprising in various Arab countries, Israeli strategic planners see Iran in a much stronger position. However, they are now looking at worst case scenarios in which either Israel attacks Iranian nuclear installations or Iran succeeds in forming a coalition of revolutionary Arab countries in a war against Israel. Under the prevailing circumstances, majority of Israelis believe that Israel might have to act alone against Iran without physical help of the US. Therefore, Israel besides realigning its strategic position, is waiting for an appropriate opportunity once the international environment becomes conducive, so as to avoid international condemnation and to minimize the repercussions of an attack against Iran.

Capabilities Required for the Strike

Israel and the US disagree on the timings of attack. While the US is willing to give diplomacy more chance, time for a pre-emptive strike is running out for Israel. If the US and Israel decide to strike Iran, it will be more effective with combined capabilities which may enable them to strike 6-7 major nuclear facilities using a mix of cruise missiles, ballistic
missiles and aircraft squadrons based on its naval fleet deployed in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf. Precision guided deep penetration bombs like GBU-27 and BLU-113 can be delivered through the strategic bombers placed at Diego Garcia. However, if Israel decides to attack unilaterally, the US would most likely help in refuelling over Iraq and in providing strategic intelligence only. In that case, only 3-4 critical nuclear sites would be selected, which includes Nuclear Research Centre and Uranium Conversion Facility at Esfahan, Uranium Enrichment Facility at Natanz, Heavy Water Plant and future plutonium production centre at Arak\textsuperscript{49} and Uranium Enrichment Facility at Qom. To undertake such a mission, Israel would need more than 90 aircrafts or approx over 20 ballistic missiles.\textsuperscript{50} Israel also has the option to use a mix of both the capabilities. Thus in an overall context, Israel does possess the capability to strike the Iranian nuclear facilities. However, such a strike would not put Iran completely out of nuclear business but rather retard the capability for acquisition of nuclear weapon by few years.

Global and Regional Implications

A strike by Israel or the US/Israel on Iran could have wide ranging global and regional implications. Some of them are explained in succeeding paragraphs:

- **Worst Case Scenario – A Nuclear War:** In a worst case scenario, there can be a breakout of a major war in the region should Israel and Iran involve in the retaliatory strikes invoking other regional countries to take sides in the conflict due to domestic or external pressures. Some analysts have even pointed towards an outbreak of a Third World War in a chain of uncontrollable events ultimately resulting in nuclear exchange between several countries.\textsuperscript{51} This scenario is developed on the hypothesis that due to domestic pressures, the regimes in most of Islamic countries including Pakistan would fall apart to be ultimately taken over by radical Islamists posing a serious threat to Israel. Resultantly, this would incite Israel to attack
Pakistani nuclear installations thus resulting in a nuclear exchange. The spill over effects would later compel other regional and global powers to either go for pre-emptive or retaliatory strikes. After the recent turmoil in Arab countries, this scenario although possible, still seems to be quite unlikely and improbable.

- **Massive Retaliation by Iran and Regional Non-State Actors:** Iranian conventional capabilities against Israel or the US are quite limited. Iran, along with Hezbollah and Hamas, at the most can fire a barrage of missiles towards Israel or send a suicidal aerial mission aimed at destroying the Israeli nuclear facilities.\(^5\) Enrolling suicide bombers from within Hezbollah and Hamas is also a possibility, but the success of such a mission is questionable due to well guarded and effective Israeli counter defence mechanism. However, such retaliation would result in high rate of civilian casualties. Moreover, Iran may also launch missile and rocket attacks against US bases in Iraq and Afghanistan thus raising high prospects of escalating the conflict and spilling it over to other countries like Turkey, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Oman, UAE and Saudi Arabia. Countries like Egypt, Tunis, Algeria, Libya and Jordan may also see an unprecedented situation of American embassies or consulates takeover in massive protests which could escalate the situation.

- **Blocking Strait of Hormez:** Iran has displayed its capability to block the narrow strait of Hormez, thus disrupting the oil supplies and creating a global oil crisis, which could have profound implications for the global economy which already lies in an imbroglio. The ongoing global economic recession and a volatile situation in Middle East could result in collapse of stock markets and world financial institutions, thus bringing down the whole capitalist system.
Rise in Terrorist Activities: Such an attack would unite the Shiite and Sunni militants in Jihad against Zionists and Americans. Thus the Shiite elements which so far have not become part of the global Jihad would also join in and terrorist incidents across the globe would become more frequent and devastating. This would result in crack down by the Western governments against Muslims, thus turning more Muslims towards radicalism and terrorism, thereby making it extremely difficult to control the situation. In longer run such a situation would result in serious political and economic instability in the Western and Muslim states.

Implications on Pakistan

Pakistan would also be profoundly affected by the pre-emptive strike on Iran. Possible scenarios emerging from such an eventuality could be:

- Severe domestic backlash thus forcing government to reverse its pro-American policies.
- Hype in anti-American sentiments causing serious threat to lives and interests of Americans in the country.
- A dramatic change in domestic situation due to anti-American and anti-government protests running out of control thus bringing down the elected government.
- A cessation of NATO and ISAF supplies to Afghanistan due to domestic fallout which could bring Pakistan into direct confrontation with the US and NATO.
- Dramatic rise in the domestic violence and terrorist activities.
- Sharp rise in the pro-Taliban and pro-militants sentiments, as more individuals would be willing to join the ranks considering it to be war between Islam and
the West, thus sending ripples in the US and Israel regarding safety of our nuclear program.

- Possibility of militant groups organizing a major terrorist event in India to escalate situation with India thus easing the pressure from tribal areas.

- A joint effort by the US, India and Israel to secure or “take out” Pakistani nuclear arsenal in case they feel any threat to these.

Conclusion

It is evident that the US doesn’t have a direct and existential threat from a nuclear Iran. The US preference for a diplomatic course towards Iranian nuclear program would still not change Israeli perceptions towards Iran. Israel perceives that the US support for Israel is not everlasting, and due to domestic or other economic considerations, this support may diminish in the future and confronting Iran, without direct or moral support from the US, would be an unmanageable scenario for Israel. Israel knows, that the window of opportunity which exists in shape of the US and European support against Iran, must be utilized before it closes down. The fear that Iran may possess a nuclear device within next few years also compels Israel to take necessary action before Iran crosses the nuclear threshold. On numerous occasions in history, Israel has withstood American pressures on its policy decisions even once the whole world was opposed to it. The strong Israeli Lobby ultimately compels the US policy and decision makers to tow the Israeli line, despite the fact that these positions at times seriously damaged the US national interests. This situation may change in future.

Therefore, availing this window of opportunity, Israel may launch a pre-emptive strike on Iran within the next few years, or until and unless some dramatic breakthrough takes place on the Iranian nuclear issue. Such a change, amidst strong Iranian position in the region after recent uprising, seems highly unlikely. A strike on Iran would have serious implications for the region and Pakistan, and therefore, it is
imperative for Pakistan to take into account the severity of situation and take necessary appropriate measures beforehand for such an eventuality.

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Notes

7 Paul, op cit.
11 Paul, op cit, 4-6.
12 Ibid.


23. Ibid, xii.


28. This World, *op cit*.


31. Ibid.
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38 Malt, Stephen, M., “More Reasons not to expect Regime Change in Iran”, Foreign Policy, 3 February 2010.
43 Evans, Michael D. and Jerome R. Corsi, op cit, 47, 196.
45 Yaphe, Judith S. and Charles D. Lutes, op cit, 38.
48 Cook, Steven A., op cit.
50 Ibid, 70-75.