

Oxford Research Group Briefing Paper – November 2011

THE LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF AN ISRAELI ATTACK ON IRAN

Paul Rogers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This briefing paper, based on the earlier Oxford Research Group report *Military Action against Iran: Impacts and Effects* (July 2010), concludes that military action against Iran should be ruled out as a means of responding to its possible nuclear weapons ambitions. The consequences of such an attack would lead to a sustained conflict and regional instability that would be unlikely to prevent the eventual acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran and might even encourage it.

Many sections of the Israeli political elite regard the Iranian nuclear and missile programme as an existential threat to Israel. If there is no progress to curtail Iran's nuclear ambitions by other means, there is significant Israeli support for military action. This might also extend to renewed action by Israel in southern Lebanon to counter the progressive re-arming of Hezbollah militias by Iran.

Iran regards a civil nuclear programme as a technological right, and sees its missile force as primarily defensive, however this might be viewed in Israel. While there is little evidence of a nuclear weapons programme, there are indications that Iran is moving towards the means to acquire that capability, even if it does not plan to take the final steps and withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

While an Israeli military strike could not be initiated entirely without the knowledge of the United States, it could avoid over-flying US-controlled airspace. The operation would target a wide range of nuclear and missile facilities and would also be aimed at the technical support, including factories, research centres and university facilities that would underpin the rebuilding of the facilities after attack. There would be significant civilian casualties.

An Iranian administration under attack would experience considerable national unity and would work rapidly to redevelop its weapons programmes, withdrawing from the NPT and prioritising nuclear weapons. This would lead to further Israeli military strikes, resulting in prolonged conflict – the start of a long war with potential regional and global consequences. Iran could, if it chose, take many other actions, including operations to affect world oil markets and to increase instability in Iraq and Afghanistan. Prospects for regional stability and wider global security would be very seriously damaged.

The briefing concludes that military action against Iran should be ruled out in responding to its possible nuclear ambitions.

ISRAELI MILITARY ACTION

If Israel decides in the coming months to take military action in order to pre-empt Iran developing nuclear weapons, it is like to have to inform the United States government in advance. It would be technically possible for Israel to avoid US-controlled airspace by circumventing Iraq, but this would be difficult. Furthermore, support facilities in the Kurdish region of north-east Iraq would greatly aid effective action. Given tacit US approval, and bearing in mind the relatively small number of long-range strike aircraft available, Israel might also use conventionally-armed land-based ballistic missiles (versions of the Jericho series) and submarine-launched cruise missiles, and quite possibly armed UAVs

staging from north-east Iraq or Azerbaijan. Both of these territories neighbouring Iran could also be used for helicopter assaults, insertion of Special Forces and the mounting of rescue missions.

There have been occasional media suggestions that Israel might use low-yield tactical nuclear earth-penetrating warheads to destroy those Iranian underground facilities that are too hardened to be affected by conventional earth-penetrating weapons (1). This is a very remote possibility which would, if utilised, have immensely serious long-term consequences for global security. Even so, the temptation might be there with the Natanz facility specifically, given its relatively remote location, as it is more than 25 km from the town of Natanz and nearly 40 km south of Kashan.

The military action itself would pay only limited attention to the suppression of Iranian air defences, given the weak state of these systems and the need to concentrate limited air power resources on the nuclear and missile facilities. The main targets would be in the following categories:

- Uranium enrichment plants and storage facilities, especially those near Natanz and Qom. There would be an emphasis on destroying the centrifuge cascades but also a sustained attempt to kill as many of the scientific and technical staff as possible. Living quarters and above-ground laboratories and other facilities would therefore be prime targets.
- The uranium conversion facility at Esfahan, a large target that underpins the whole nuclear programme.
- Nuclear research and development facilities, including those in Tehran and near Arak. The new reactors at Bushehr would be targeted, not necessarily the reactors themselves, given the risk of radioactive contamination affecting other countries in the Gulf region, but control systems, laboratories and living quarters would be likely targets.
- Factories manufacturing equipment in support of the programme. There would be an emphasis on those plants directly involved in centrifuge construction, but targeting would extend to a range of factories directly connected with the programme.
- Bases housing missiles capable of hitting targets in Israel and personnel associated with them, together with research, development and production facilities for Iran's missile programme and the staff working in them. The military base at Parchin which is reported to include a new chamber intended for nuclear-related explosives testing would also be a likely target.
- Those university departments of physics, engineering, electronics and related subjects most closely related to the nuclear and missile programmes. One of the main intentions would be to do as much damage as possible to any Iranian technical expertise, including advanced training facilities that were in any sense useful to a nuclear weapons programme, present or future, as well as the ballistic missile programme.

While these would be the main targets, there might also be attempts to kill elements of the technocratic leadership, especially those experienced technocrats who are responsible for planning and even leading Iran's nuclear and missile programmes. While some might be based in locations close to the nuclear and missile facilities, such as Natanz, Tabriz and Khorramabad, many would be based in Tehran. It follows that one consequence of the need to target such people as well as factories, research centres and university departments, is that war would come directly to the capital of the country for the first time since the "war of the cities" (the exchange of Scud missile attacks during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s). With many civilian casualties, Iran would have the feel of a country at war, rather than one receiving specific, if substantial, attacks in relatively remote localities.

This may be at variance with accepted opinion. In the public mind, there is the idea that a military strike on Iran, like that on Iraq in 1981, would consist primarily of a series of bombing attacks on nuclear infrastructure - it would, in effect, be a “war against military real estate”, the aim being to destroy physical targets such as centrifuge cascades. While these would indeed be hit, at least as important would be the requirement to do as much damage as possible to Iranian attempts to resuscitate a nuclear research and development programme after the attack. It is for this reason that so much attention would be focused on technical personnel, with a determined effort to kill as many such people as possible. Since this would include university facilities and other research centres, the end result would be an attack with a very broad effect.

Israel did not stage wide-ranging attacks on Iraq in 1981, quite probably because of a limited strike capability, and one consequence of this was that the Iraqi rapidly reconstituted a nuclear weapons programme, using the uranium rather than the plutonium route since it could be more easily dispersed. The Iranian nuclear programme is already dispersed, making it more necessary to destroy the more basic infrastructure and people that underpin the programme and its potential for producing nuclear weapons. It should be noted that Israel’s targeting of facilities in the West Bank in 2002, Lebanon in 2006 and Gaza in 2008/9, all show evidence of this approach.

In attacking Iranian nuclear and missile facilities, Israel would recognise the risk of an indirect response from Hezbollah in Lebanon. In order to pre-empt this, Israel might act first in order to destroy as much of Hezbollah’s missiles as possible, especially in view of the rapid increase in the missile armaments since the 2006 war (2). There have been reliable reports that the Israeli Defence Forces have developed comprehensive plans for a large-scale campaign that would see “an all-out assault on the party’s arsenals, command centres, commercial assets and strongholds throughout the country” (3). Given that Hezbollah will have planned to counter such an operation, it should be assumed that the resulting conflict will be protracted.

IRANIAN RESPONSES

The effect of the attacks on Iran would almost certainly not be the wholesale destruction of Iranian nuclear capabilities, yet there would be considerable damage done in terms of physical infrastructure. There would also be many civilian casualties, both directly in terms of civilians working on Iran’s nuclear programme, but also their families as their living quarters were hit, and secretaries, cleaners, labourers and others in research stations, university departments and factories. These more general impacts would be common knowledge within Iran and also widely reported across the Middle East.

In terms of Iranian responses, there are two areas in which these can be confidently expected, together with a number of options that may be utilised over a range of timescales. The first immediate response would be a withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, a process requiring ninety days notice. This would be a clear signal that Iran no longer felt bound by the Treaty, especially having been attacked by a country that has never signed the Treaty. Iran could claim justification for the decision since *Article X* of the Treaty requires that a state intending to withdraw gives reasons for that decision, such as if “extraordinary events related to the subject matter of this treaty have jeopardized the supreme interests of its country.”

The second, and closely related, response would be an immediate decision to prioritise the development of nuclear weapons to deter further attacks. Such development might use deeply-buried facilities that are reported to be under construction. Indeed, it is probable that the Iranian nuclear planners have long assumed that a military assault was likely and that plans have been made to ensure survival and reinvigoration of a core part of any potential weapons capability.

NPT withdrawal and determined development of nuclear weapons would almost certainly have considerable domestic support, part of a process of political unity transcending current political barriers. As part of this unity the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps would be expected to increase its status as it took a firm hold on future nuclear developments, working with other states and sub-state actors to speed the process.

Iran would also have the potential to act in a number of areas, not all of them directly related to Israel, but many of them targeting the United States and its western partners considered to be so markedly pro-Israeli. Given that the strike aircraft used in the attack would be of US origin, and the closeness of the US/Israel military relationship cited earlier, one should expect that a narrative of US involvement (e.g. "US warplanes in Israeli markings" and an assumption of active US permission and support, whether true or not) would be common and widely accepted.

Spheres of action could include any or all of the following.

- Missile attacks on Israel using conventionally-armed systems might be carried out primarily to demonstrate the survival of a capability after an initial Israeli attack. These would be intended principally to undermine Israeli morale rather than have any serious military effect.
- Closure of the Straits of Hormuz, however brief, would cause a sharp rise in oil prices and be a reminder of Iran's leverage over Gulf shipping routes. Any sustained price rise would have a potentially catastrophic impact on the global economy.
- Paramilitary and/or missile attacks on western Gulf oil production, processing and transportation facilities would be of very deep concern to the producer states, especially Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. While such facilities have much more intense security than a decade ago, they remain essentially soft targets.
- Action in Iraq and Afghanistan in support of those groups opposing western involvement could be tailored to discourage further attacks on Iran.

Apart from NPT withdrawal and determined, if clandestine, attempts at a nuclear "break-out", all of the other options could remain available but not necessarily implemented in the short term. An assumption of immediate military and paramilitary responses is mistaken in that the Iranian government might well feel that it has time on its side, because it will know that an initial major assault on targets other than Israel will mean it might lose the political "high ground" garnered from being attacked by Israel in the first place.

From an Iranian perspective, it will be recognised that the leaderships of a number of Arab countries would publicly condemn Israel but would actually be privately content with any action that limited Tehran's nuclear ambitions, even if it was undertaken by Israel. At the same time, the reaction of public opinion in the region would be different, notwithstanding that Shi'a communities are in the minority in western Gulf States apart from Iraq. At a general level, Arab public opinion would be strongly opposed to the Israeli action and would see it as essentially a joint US/Israeli action against a Moslem country. This would be the case, however much Washington denied involvement – the perception of Israel as a wholly client state of the United State is deeply embedded across the region. Furthermore, there are substantial Shi'a minorities in eastern Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, many of them with close family and business relations with Iran that would be deeply antagonised by the attack and the presumed US support.

Perhaps the most important aspect of an Israel attack on Iranian nuclear and missile facilities is that it would almost certainly be the beginning of a long-term process of regular air strikes to further prevent

the development of nuclear weapons and delivery systems. From Israel's perspective, there will already be recognition that an Iranian response would be an attempted nuclear break-out, rather than a termination of the programme. Hence, once Israel had started to limit Iranian nuclear and missile developments, it could not easily stop.

At some stage Iran might calculate that high levels of international support stemming from being at the receiving end of repeated Israeli raids would mean that it could consider some of the other responses cited above, even if they were to involve a widening conflict. The key point here is that the immediate consequences of an Israeli attack on Iran might not be massive and might not result on a wider regional conflict, with the likely exception of southern Lebanon. The longer-term consequences, however, might be very different.

THE UNEXPECTED

The analysis undertaken here is based on the assumption of unwise behaviour by Israel, which from its own perspective is rational, followed by responses by Iran. It does not take into account unexpected events leading to crises, either before or after an Israeli attack. For example, a new conflict with Hezbollah in southern Lebanon might start through an untoward incident and leading to rapid crisis escalation, including Israeli attacks on supply lines then inciting Syrian and even Iranian responses. The latter could lead, in turn, to a wider war between Israel and Iran beginning with Israeli air assaults against Iranian missile deployments and then to attacks on nuclear facilities. After an attack, while Iranian response might be limited, as indicated above, there would be very high states of tension in the Persian Gulf. In such circumstances, irregular Iranian forces, perhaps acting outside the national command structure, might take action against US forces or against international shipping, leading to responses from western Gulf States or the United States itself, with this quite possibly escalating into a regional conflict.

These are added, but frequently forgotten, elements that should further encourage non-military approaches to the issue of the Iranian nuclear programme. This paper has sought to examine the risk and consequences of war stemming from foreseeable and analysable factors. It always has to be remembered that it is the unexpected and unpredictable that can so readily complicate matters.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of this analysis, an Israeli attack on Iran would be the start of a protracted conflict that would be unlikely to prevent the eventual acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran and might even encourage it. This would be in addition to the extensive instability and unpredictable security consequences for the region and the wider world. If these dangerous consequences are sufficient to militate against military action, then there remain two paths open to western states:

- One is to redouble efforts to get a diplomatic settlement, a process more likely to achieve results, if prospects for an Israeli/Palestinian peace process are greatly increased, if relations between Iran and western Gulf States improve and if there is the beginning of a prospect of a regional nuclear-free zone. There was some modest progress on the latter issue at the 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference in New York.
- The other is to accept that Iran may eventually acquire a nuclear capability and use that as the start of a process of balanced regional denuclearisation. There should be no pretence that this would be easy, given Israel's position and the possibility that an Iranian nuclear weapon capability could encourage regional proliferation.

A detailed assessment of these options is beyond the scope of this briefing. The point to be stressed here is that this analysis indicates that the consequences of a military attack on Iran are so serious that

they should not be encouraged in any shape or form. That may be an uncomfortable conclusion, given that some of the more robust diplomatic approaches may carry with them an implicit threat of military action, but it is realistic. Put bluntly, war is not an option in responding to the difficult issue of Iran's nuclear ambitions.

NOTES

1. Uzi Mahnaimi and Sarah Baxter, "Revealed: Israel plans nuclear strike on Iran", *The Times*, London, 1 July 2007.
2. Mona Alami, "Hezbollah Rocket Inventories Worry Israel, U.S." *IPS/Terra Viva*, New York, 4 May 2010.
3. Barbara Opall-Rome, "Israel's New Hard Line on Hizbollah", *Defense News*, 31 May 2010.

Paul Rogers is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group (ORG) and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. He is the author or many ORG reports, books and the ORG International Security Monthly Briefings. The briefings are available from the ORG website at www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk, where visitors can sign-up to receive them via email each month.

Copyright © Oxford Research Group, 2011

Some rights reserved. This briefing is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Licence. For more information please visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>.