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## Position Paper

# Israeli Strike on Iran: Motives and Restraints

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The Iranian nuclear programme is rising once again as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) expressed its concern over the programme's military dimensions in a recent report; Israel hints at targeting it militarily and Washington warns the former of the consequences of doing so and insists on international sanctions. How far will the rise extend?

The International Atomic Agency's report came as a result of developments in the Iranian nuclear programme on the 8th of November, concluding a week of events aiming to wage a war of anxiety on the regime in Tehran pertaining to its nuclear programme. This began with the Israeli transcontinental missile Jericho III, disclosing training undertaken by the Israeli Air Force in the Italian island of Sardinia with the participation of European air units from Italy, Holland and Germany and a training project for the command of the home front in Israel to simulate confrontation of dense missile strikes in the depth of the state. There were also infiltrations about a secret visit to Tel Aviv conducted by British Chief of Staff General David Richards and the departure of Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak the following day, directly to the British capital, and a campaign of visits to Washington. All in all, these events indicate preparations in both the West and Israel for waging war on Iranian nuclear facilities.

The agency's report in particular restored the question of the Iranian nuclear programme to the international agenda after it had been dominated by the incidents and events of the revolutions of the Arab spring and the destructive financial crisis in the Euro region as well as the consequences of the upcoming U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and the awaited withdrawal from Afghanistan. The report demonstrated an unprecedented leap from the agency's previous reports by including a supplement of fourteen pages addressing chronological and regulatory developments of the military aspect of the programme. This was based on intelligence reports presented by ten member states leading to an overwhelming accusation directed at Iran "that the agency is critically concerned about the potential military aspects of the nuclear programme in Iran" and that "reliable information indicates that Iran has undergone activities relevant to the development of a nuclear explosion device, and that some of these activities are still ongoing".

The report provoked – and continues to provoke – wide controversy among experts and researchers in global media outlets; some of which are supporters considering it as a decisive political and diplomatic achievement in favour of the United States, its allies and Israel against Iran and its allies, Russia and China, which are reserved about the increase of punishment procedures. Others, however, oppose the report as they consider it a question of political tactic and public relations rather than methodological work emerging from the responsibilities of the international agency. The agency is essentially as a professional organisation considering that the report brought forth an avowal from the agency that it is "unable to provide credible confirmation about the absence of nuclear materials in Iran thus allowing it to conclude all nuclear material and activity is peaceful". These oppositionists went on to accuse IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano of wasting and undermining the agency's international status by publishing questionable presumptive analyses in favour of a political campaign led by the United States and Israel against Iran.

### **Political Considerations of a Potential Israeli Military Strike**

Overall, the agency's report strongly raised great questions about the extent of effectiveness of international multiparty and unilateral sanctions on Iran, and possibilities of carrying a military strike to Iranian nuclear facilities in aims to undermine or terminate the nuclear programme by the United States, which still appears reserved about launching the strike, or as Israel, which is always motivated to carry out such an operation. Subsequently, approaching the positions of the two states in terms of the outcome of the IAEA report symbolises an important necessity before exploring the possibilities of an Israeli military strike on Iran.

## The United States: Relying on Diplomatic Exhaustion

On one hand, a campaign is being led by the falcons of journalism and media as well as of the U.S. Congress demanding the launch of international military action led by the United States for the termination of Iran's nuclear programme with consideration to compelling evidence. The warnings IAEA provided in its report which Senator Joe Lieberman compared to the pre-emptive warnings released by the Hart-Rudman Commission in January 2001 about an expected immense terrorist attack in the United States was also taken into consideration. He warningly declared, "the agency's blatant message is that the extremist regime in Iran works effectively to acquire nuclear weapons, and the time available to stop them is running out".

On another hand, the U.S. administration appears and is, accordingly to its officials, especially reserved about its position on what was issued in the report as it does not include significant advancement of Iranian efforts to acquire a nuclear explosion device. Some of the administration's staff focuses on the agency's conclusion that "a structured programme for the development of a nuclear head may have come to an end since 2003". According to one, "the organisation that regulated the programme was severed and its leadership was dismantled and thus such an issue does not exist".

Accordingly, the U.S. administration's approach following the release of the agency's report is committed to demanding that Tehran hasten in providing explanations about all the evidence the report cited regarding the military aspect of its nuclear programme in addition to the administration's conviction that the coercive diplomacy it exercises towards Iran since the issuance of Security Council Resolution 1929, which has adopted tighter collective and unilateral sanctions on Iran and supports undercover work that Israel carries out against elements of the Iranian nuclear programme (e.g. the murder of scholars, electronic virus war, etc.) in addition to promoting the quantitative and qualitative military capabilities of Arab Gulf countries in the Iranian vicinity, all of which are ultimately effective and capable of pushing the Iranian regime towards limiting its nuclear programme to an absolute minimum and accepting a negotiated solution ensuring the elimination of certain nuclear capabilities that may contribute to the development of a nuclear explosion device in the future.

This approach clearly appears in recent statements made by the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta on the 10th of November in which he declared that "military action is the last resort", that "it is important to ensure that the toughest economic and diplomatic sanctions are applied against Iran to change its behaviour" and that "the United States currently discusses with its allies additional sanctions that should be imposed on Iran".

Overall, the U.S. administration recognises that currently several factors intertwine to eliminate forthcoming military action against Iran. Perhaps the most prominent of which is the need to concentrate large numbers of ground forces near the Iranian borders to support the credibility of the air campaign launched against Iranian nuclear facilities, which may conflict with procedures of the upcoming and expected U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan respectively as well as circumstances of the financial and economic crisis, and the nature of current national disposition in the American interior opposing more foreign military intervention, (in a recent poll, supporters of military action against Iran in the United States comprise a mere 13% and 6% European NATO member states).

## Israel: A Short Hand

The agency's report came to support its promotion of presence a military aspect of Iran's nuclear programme, which impelled it to declare that "the agency during Yukiya Amano's reign has reinstated its credibility after former Director General Mohamed Elbaradei, who was to a great extent Iran's partner, had squandered it", according to claims of Israeli leaders. Officials in Tel Aviv recognise how difficult it is to duplicate what Israel had done before towards nuclear facilities in Iraq (June 1981) and Syria (September 2007)

whether in terms of surprising the international community or eliminating the danger existing at that time with one strike. This is due to operational military considerations and expectations of geopolitical consequences critical not only to Israel but also to the region and the world as a whole owing to potential Iranian responses which range from targeting oil facilities in the Gulf vicinity, obstructing or even closing the Strait of Hormuz (which is crossed by 33% of international marine oil trade), and targeting American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan or targeting military and civilian centres in Europe by activating dormant cells prepared for such. All of these Iranian responses are considered beyond Israel's range and ability. In fact, Tel Aviv will allocate its efforts to confront Iran's retaliatory responses – which are numerous and various ranging between Iranian ballistic missile strikes against military and nuclear targets to tens of thousands of short- and medium-range missiles that may target residential centres in Israel up to its centre and beyond from the Iranian-supported Arab vicinity of Syria and Lebanon – as well as its allies towards the Israeli interior.

The consequences of a sudden Israeli strike on Iran appear obvious to American officials as illustrated by U.S. Defence Secretary Leon Panetta's warnings in his recent above mentioned statement that "a military strike against the Iranian nuclear programme will only result in the deceleration of the programme for no more than three years in turn uniting Iranians behind their regime and boosting their insistence to pursue the acquisition of nuclear weapons", in addition to the fact that the strike, according to Panetta, "will have serious effects on the region and U.S. forces in the region and in this case everyone should take caution".

In confronting all of this, it appears that the dilemma lies in confronting the decision-maker in Tel Aviv in terms of his awareness of the dangers of an Iranian approach to the acquisition of nuclear weapons and its disastrous consequences on Israeli security and of the difficulty of obtaining American approval for the launching of unilateral military action against Iran as well as the conviction of the limitedness of this military action's operational results if it is carried out unilaterally without the participation of the United States and its international allies.

In any case, displaying the dimensions of Israeli military action against Iranian nuclear facilities has become necessary in the backdrop of a turbulent atmosphere that has not yet subsided following the issuance of IAEA's recent report even if it were on the basis of the assumption that Israel is alone in this action in the absence of prior American knowledge or approval.

## **Military Considerations for a Potential Israel Strike**

Political and military leaders in Israel recognize a number of operational limitations imposed by the nature of the future theatre of military action, and the conditions and preparations of the targeted opponent, most prominent of which is:

### **Features of Bombing Objectives**

Iran ensued the vast geographical publication of the contents of its nuclear programme and avoided restricting it to a single place or proximity as the expansion included Isfahan (Uranium Conversion Facility, UCF), Natanz (Fuel Enrichment Plant, FEP), Arak (heavy water reactor, IR-40, and heavy water production plant, HWPP), and Qom (Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant, FFEF, which was finally unveiled in September 2009).

Moreover, the last two facilities have high levels of immunity to potential air and missile strikes owing to underground construction and dense levels of immunisation (the imposition of Iran's use in the Fordow facility near Qom of the layers of natural rock in the region by placing centrifuges for enrichment below them and neutralising the effects of bombs for heavily fortified targets underground and the more developed GBU-28 that the Obama administration sold to Israel immediately after assuming authority in 2009. Serious talks have been initiated concerning the need for extensive commando operations for the penetration and corruption of the facility.) Also, the existence of these

targets in numerous heavily populated and economically active regions entail that military action will lead to the loss of countless lives and immense mutual damage and thus international humanitarian considerations hinder the military option. These are real challenges confronting the effectiveness of the Israeli strike.

### **The Geographical Distance of Bombing Objectives**

If Israel decides to use air force (which is likely), Israeli planes will have to cross three routes:

1. The northern Syrian-Turkish route which is the longest of the three (2400-2900 kilometres); Israel had used this route in the bombing of the alleged Syrian nuclear facility near Deir ez-Zor in September 2007.
2. The central Jordanian-Iraqi route which is the shortest of the three (1500-1700 kilometres).
3. The southern Jordanian-Saudi route whose length is about 1900-2100 kilometres; Israel used this route in the bombing of an Iraqi reactor in June 1981.

Accordingly, the bombing mission will require the unauthorized – even if publicized – crossing of other countries' airfields and the execution of aerial refueling operations for strike aircraft above the territories of these countries, which will not allow the recurrence of the bombing mission despite Israelis' pursuit of innovative operational solutions for what this geographical distance truly necessitates.

### **The Window of Interior Susceptibility**

Israel recognizes the existence of a time gap available to its opponents in the vicinity during the period between the start of Israeli bombing of nuclear facilities in Iran and the return and landing of strike aircraft and their re-preparation in their home base for other air missions. During this gap, an operational opportunity will be provided for Israel's opponents to launch missile attacks against these air bases and command and control centres and cause destruction to infrastructure and major population centres in Israel.

Facing the operational limitations, some of the most prominent of which mentioned above, and the doubtful success of the effectiveness, the unilateral Israeli strike in impeding the Iranian nuclear programme are adversative results, the least of which – if the Iranian response indicates its restriction to Israel without reaching other regional and international parties – will not be Iran's restoration to the regional and international acceptance that it had lost in recent years and Iranian national mobilisation for a regime that had begun to lose internal sympathy and support; and before that, the international cohesion witnessed by the negotiation process with Iran concerning its nuclear programme will begin to disintegrate considering the ceaseless doubts about an American role in this process.

More importantly, Iran will begin to develop its nuclear weapons actively and more secretly in the backdrop and because of their initial unavailability this sort of violence occurred on Iranian territory and against Iranian capabilities.

This is how the political and military situation appears after the issuance of IAEA's report on the 8th of November concerning the Iranian nuclear programme. The greater question that will be raised in the future is: will Israeli aircraft fly eastward one day toward Iranian airspace even if it does not acquire American approval?

The statement of George Kennan, one of the senior American strategists who established the policies of the Cold War after World War II, that "perhaps war begins with certain ideas in your mind as do objectives, but in the end you will find yourself fighting for the

sake of other completely different things that you had not thought of before" applies to the Israeli military option.

Source: Al Jazeera Center for Studies

