



Striking Iran

Could the prospect of US elections prompt Israel to attack?

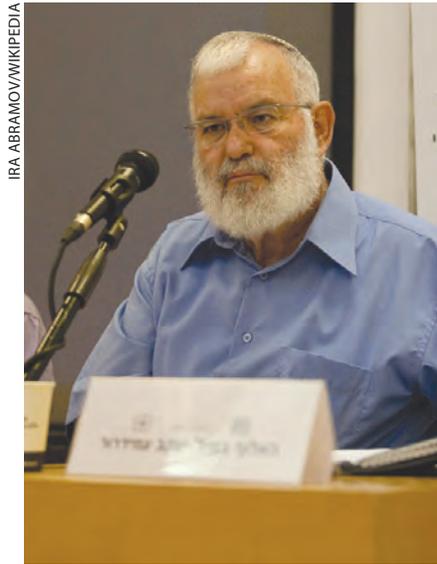
THE YEAR 2020 has seen significant changes in the handling of the Iran’s malevolent behavior by the US and Israel. From the American targeted assassination of Qasem Soleimani, the brains of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, along with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis the leader of the most significant Iranian-controlled Shi’ite militia in Iraq (Kataib Hezbollah), to the mysterious explosions throughout Iran’s infrastructure including sensitive locations for Iran’s nuclear weapons industrial complex, to Israel’s increased attacks on Iranian assets in Syria, this year may well be decisive in determining if a northern regional war is on the horizon.

In response to the escalating situation, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley flew to Israel this summer to speak to Israel’s military, security and intelligence leadership. As Efraim Inbar, president of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security said, “The strike on Soleimani warns Iran that the option for expanded US use of force against Iran is on the table.”

But make no mistake about it, Iran is a sophisticated enemy who has made a strategic decision to accelerate its nuclear program in coordination with its increased activity in Lebanon and Syria. It has directed Hezbollah to act more provocatively from both Lebanon and Syria, while pursuing its never-ending transfer of precision guided missile technology, which threatens all of Israel. It continues to challenge Israel by further entrenching itself in Israel’s neighbors, moving into southern Syria opposite the Israeli Golan to fortify its new frontier from the northeast.

In response, Israel not only continues its relentless strikes on Iranian infrastructure in Syria but has allegedly been behind the attacks within Iran proper that have unnerved its revolutionary leadership. A “pandemically” dazed world has hardly taken notice of the significant geopolitical changes happening in the region.

Not since the Stutnex cyberattack more than 10 years ago has the Iranian nuclear weapons infrastructure been so significantly



Yaakov Amidror

damaged, at least publicly. Of course, Israel’s legendary heist of Iran’s nuclear plans in 2018 should have reminded the world that despite Iranian promises and the ayatollahs alleged fatwa against nuclear weapons, the West remains oblivious to its practice of taddiyah, religiously sanctioned dissimulation i.e. lying, for the greater good of Iran’s Twelver Shia Islamist project.

The most important take-away lesson from all of these reported attacks is that Iran remains vulnerable to both cyber and conventional sabotage at its most guarded sites in Iran, as well as conventional attacks of its forces and assets in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.

So the question is, if Israel has shown that it can delay Iran’s march to nuclear weapons capabilities, why does it still contemplate a complex air and missile attack in the Iranian homeland, knowing all the political risks and inevitable international fallout?

The answer is that there is only so much that clandestine espionage and advanced computer attacks can do, even with Israel’s impressive intelligence capabilities. Sooner or later Israel will have to make a monumental choice regarding preemptive strikes

on targets in Iran, if it concludes that Iran is getting too close to possessing nuclear weapons, an existential threat that no Israeli leader across its political spectrum could countenance. Every year Iran’s “zone of immunity” increases, where their “nuclear infrastructure becomes so well-protected or dispersed that an attack would be futile.”

The Iranian regime is extremely patient, and its vision to destroy the Jewish state is not necessarily in one blow. Its goal is to demoralize Israeli society over time with the constant fear of missiles being indiscriminately sent into its population’s centers, hoping over time that the Jews will abandon their homeland and with-it Zionism.

Iran began this project decades ago in Lebanon with Hezbollah, then turned to Gaza with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, then turned to Syria making Assad dependent on its militias, with its next goal a revolution in Jordan and the West Bank, with the emergence of an Islamist leadership there under Iran’s thumb or at least in cahoots with it.

Now add to this puzzle a Joe Biden presidency and a Democratic victory in Congress this November, with the promised reversal from US President Donald Trump’s approach that withdrew from the nuclear deal and imposed maximal sanctions. The stakes may never be higher for an Israeli decision to prevent Iran from crossing the threshold as an established nuclear power with all of its perilous consequences. It is possible this is Israel’s last realistic chance to strike, but that ship may have already sailed.

Biden is not alone in wanting to reengage with Iran. Trump, despite withdrawing from the Iran agreement (JCPOA), in part due to his administration’s assessment that the deal undermined long-term American interests, has said he too wants to renegotiate a grand deal if reelected, and it’s not too far-fetched to believe that the Iranians may decide that they cannot survive another four years of the maximum pressure campaign without risking a popular rebellion.

The stark difference is that Biden is willing to re-enter the Obama-era nuclear deal

and ease sanctions before renegotiating significant outstanding issues, while Trump has said he will not end any sanctions until a deal is concluded. Some fig-leaf concessions from Iran before re-joining the JCPOA will be attempted by a Biden administration to camouflage what is really going on. Giving away the store first with the hope for reciprocity is always a losing strategy in the Middle East, perceived as a sign of weakness. As Biden said, "I would rejoin the agreement and use our renewed commitment to diplomacy to work with our allies to strengthen and extend it."

This spring, Biden's top foreign policy adviser Tony Blinken said that if Iran came back into full compliance of its obligations to the JCPOA, Biden "would come back into compliance as well." If this is true, and there is no reason to believe otherwise, all of the maximum sanctions leverage would disappear, which would also mean according to the deal's provisions, allowing Iran to buy an unlimited number of conventional weapons, as the sunset provision for arms sales to Iran expires October 2020.

Knowing that a Biden victory is a strong possibility, Israel may decide to act in its national interest and attack Iran's nuclear infrastructure sooner rather than later, before Biden could be in office to stop it. Although Trump has said in the past that he would back an Israeli strike, there is no guarantee he would give Israel a green light if he believes it would drag America into a Middle East war.

Americans have been hearing about the threat of a nuclear Iran for three decades with still no bomb. For much of the US foreign policy establishment, Israel is like the boy who cries wolf, threatening to strike but never acting. It should be recalled that Netanyahu and his former defense minister, Ehud Barak, were in favor of attacking Iran, but were thwarted in 2010 by then-IDF chief Gabi Ashkenazi. Then in 2011, the security cabinet, heeding the advice of intelligence agencies, voted against a strike.

Iran has now breached the nuclear limits of the JCPOA by enriching past the 3.67% limit, shortening the breakout time from a year to just a few months to cross the uranium enrichment threshold, so counting on cyber and small clandestine targeted strikes will likely not be enough. Just as signal intelligence cannot completely replace human

intelligence, there is only so much cyber-terrorism can do.

The JCPOA mistakenly or deliberately allowed Iran to continue research and development on advanced centrifuges, increasing the chance for a quick breakout to just a month or two, way too late for Israel to act. That clearly means that a coordinated attack to select sites throughout Iran that could cripple its breakout capacity for years is already being considered.

Even proponents of the JCPOA have to acknowledge that the restrictions of the Iran deal, modest as they are, will all sunset over time, and barring a regime change, the Islamic Republic will also then have the international community's seal of approval for its terrorist state to possess nuclear weapons.

All of this may be a house of cards, as the West only looks at Iran's declared nuclear program. The JCPOA did not allow IAEA inspections of military sites for suspected nuclear development, and believing that they are not actively working at military sites requires the willing suspension of disbelief. Based on Israel's outing of Iran's past nuclear work two years ago, the IAEA finally requested permission to inspect two undeclared Iranian sites.

Is Israel's alleged activity this summer against Iranian nuclear facilities a harbinger of a large-scale attack? According to John Hannah at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, "Between an exclusive reliance on additional sanctions and a dangerous military strike, there may still be room for coercive diplomacy to play an important role. Specifically, the United States, Israel, or preferably both could communicate to Iran a set of red lines regarding its current nuclear expansion that, if crossed, would dramatically increase the likelihood of a forceful response."

Unfortunately this won't work with the Europeans, who have little problem pretending they don't see what Iran is doing, so long as they can make money dealing with the regime. As an example, in July 2020 Josep Borrell – the EU high representative for foreign affairs and security policy in charge of the JCPOA – said, "Owing to the unprecedented level of access... IAEA was able to confirm... Iran had met all its obligations under the deal."

Yet just a month earlier, according to *The Wall Street Journal*, "Member states from

the United Nations atomic agency board voted to condemn Iran for failing to cooperate with its probe of Tehran's nuclear activities." This is because inspections for clandestine work at military sites was not included in either the JCPOA or UNSC 2231.

Until the Iranian people overthrow their repressive regime, Iran's current leadership will not change its spots, and Tehran will want nuclear weapons if only for the immunity it provides against offensive attacks. Which brings us back to the possibility of a strike on Iran's nuclear infrastructure to kick the can much farther down the road than cyber-terrorism, assassinations, or sabotage can do, assuming the zone of immunity has not already been reached.

If an Israeli attack is possible, knowing Iran will never negotiate honestly, it seems inevitable that Israel will have to decide at some point whether it can live with the possibility of an Iranian nuclear weapon protected by a non-foolproof missile defense. Then Israel would live with the hope that mutually assured destruction, as the US and Soviet Union did during the Cold War, would restrain Iran. That could be a miscalculation of the highest order.

How should Israel approach the future? According to Maj.-Gen. (ret.) Yaakov Amidror of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, "a nuclear Iran could pose an existential threat to Israel in the future, or at least launch a very aggressive policy against it, under a nuclear umbrella... Preventing Iran's military nuclearization is Israel's biggest challenge." Yet he cautions Israel to "navigate its path based on the assumption that it cannot... fundamentally change the situation in the Middle East, neither by political agreements nor by using military force."

Knowing there are no easy answers with the stakes so high, the question is, would a Biden or Trump presidency increase the chance that Israel would choose to act sooner rather than later. We have been down this road before, but one day it may become a reality. ■

The writer is the director of MEPIN (Middle East Political Information Network), and regularly briefs members of Congress and their foreign policy aides, as well White House advisers.