

## As things look, Israel may well attack Iran soon

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As a result of misguided American policy, the threat of another military confrontation hangs like a dark cloud over the Middle East. The United States' enemies have been strengthened, and Iran - despite being branded as a member of the so-called "axis of evil" - has been catapulted into regional hegemony. Iran could never have achieved this on its own, certainly not in such a short time.

A hitherto latent rivalry between Iran and Israel thus has been transformed into an open struggle for dominance in the Middle East. The result has been the emergence of some surprising, if not bizarre, alliances: Iran, Syria, Hizbullah, Hamas and the American-backed, Shiite-dominated Iraq are facing Israel, Saudi Arabia, and most of the other Sunni Arab states, all of which feel existentially threatened by Iran's ascendance.

The danger of a major confrontation has been heightened further by a series of factors: persistently high oil prices, which have created new financial and political opportunities for Iran; the possible defeat of the West and its regional allies in proxy wars in Gaza and Lebanon; and the United Nations Security Council's failure to induce Iran to accept even a temporary freeze of its nuclear program.

Iran's nuclear program is the decisive factor in this equation, for it threatens irreversibly the region's strategic balance. That Iran - a country whose president never tires of calling for Israel's annihilation and that threatens Israel's northern and southern borders through its massive support of proxy wars waged by Hizbullah and Hamas - might one day have missiles with nuclear warheads is Israel's worst security nightmare. Politics is not just about facts, but also about perceptions. Whether or not a perception is accurate is beside the point, because it nonetheless leads to decisions.

This applies in particular when the perception concerns what the parties consider to be threats to their very existence. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's threats of annihilation are taken seriously in Israel because of the trauma of the Holocaust. And most Arab governments share the fear of a nuclear Iran. Earlier this month, Israel celebrated its 60th birthday, and US President George W. Bush went to Jerusalem to play a leading part in the commemoration. But those who had expected that his visit would mainly be about the stalled negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians were bitterly disappointed. Bush's central topic, including his speech to Israel's Knesset, was Iran. Bush had promised to bring the Middle East conflict closer to a resolution before the end of his term this year. But his final visit to Israel seemed to indicate that his objective was different: he seemed to be planning, together with Israel, to end the Iranian nuclear program - and to do so by military, rather than by diplomatic, means.

Anyone following the press in Israel during the anniversary celebrations and listening closely to what was said in Jerusalem did not have to be a prophet to understand that matters are coming to a head. Consider the following:

First, “stop the appeasement!” is a demand raised across the political spectrum in Israel – and what is meant is the nuclear threat emanating from Iran.

Second, while Israel celebrated, Defense Minister Ehud Barak was quoted as saying that a life-and-death military confrontation was a distinct possibility.

Third, the outgoing commander of the Israeli Air Force declared that the air force was capable of any mission, no matter how difficult, to protect the country’s security. The destruction of a Syrian nuclear facility last year, and the lack of any international reaction to it, were viewed as an example for the coming action against Iran.

Fourth, the Israeli wish list for US arms deliveries, discussed with the American president, focused mainly on the improvement of the attack capabilities and precision of the Israeli Air Force.

Fifth, diplomatic initiatives and UN sanctions when it comes to Iran are seen as hopelessly ineffective.

And sixth, with the approaching end of the Bush presidency and uncertainty about his successor’s policy, the window of opportunity for Israeli action is seen as potentially closing.

The last two factors carry special weight. While Israeli military intelligence is on record as saying that Iran is expected to cross the red line on the path to nuclear power between 2010 and 2015 at the earliest, the feeling in Israel is that the political window of opportunity to attack is now, during the last months of Bush’s presidency.

Although it is acknowledged in Israel that an attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities would involve grave and hard-to-assess risks, the choice between acceptance of an Iranian bomb and an attempt at its military destruction, with all the attendant consequences, is clear. Israel won’t stand by and wait for matters to take their course.

The Middle East is drifting toward a new great confrontation in 2008. Iran must understand that without a diplomatic solution in the coming months, a dangerous military conflict is very likely to erupt. It is high time for serious negotiations to begin.

The most recent offer by the six powers – the UN Security Council’s five permanent members plus Germany – is on the table, and it goes very far in accommodating Iran’s interests. The decisive question, however, will be whether it will be possible to freeze the Iranian nuclear program for the duration of the negotiations to avoid a military confrontation before these negotiations are completed. Should this newest attempt fail, things will soon get serious. Deadly serious.

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