

# The failure of logic in the US–Israeli– Iranian escalation

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In recent months there has been a notable escalation in the warnings emanating from Israel and the United States about the threat of Iran’s nuclear program, which will allegedly culminate in the construction of a nuclear weapon. Accompanying these warnings have been open threats that Israel is considering bombing Iran’s nuclear facilities, which Netanyahu’s government claims would slow or halt Iran’s alleged striving towards a WMD. Israel charges that a nuclear Iran poses an existential threat to the Jewish state, a claim that has been repeated since the start of last decade. Solutions to the stand-off abound, but only three are permitted to be spoken of as legitimate courses of action.

The first is the continuation and extension of US-imposed sanctions in the vague hope that these will force a domestic revolt against the ruling regime or Ahmadinejad’s presidency. Even if sanctions succeed in making the ruling clerics unpopular within Iran (although this tactic usually produces the opposite result, increasing support for the government), sanctions should be viewed as an illegitimate form of collective punishment, as they have little effect on government policy but important consequences for the average Iranian. Obama’s insistence on maintaining the campaign of sanctions could also be interpreted as a stalling tactic to delay

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any action on the stand-off until after this year's US presidential elections, under the assumption that he (Obama) will be re-elected and then have greater mobility in developing policy in his second term. Launching a war just prior to a presidential race is not an ideal campaign drawcard.

The second option as promoted by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is a bombing campaign against Iran's nuclear sites. Such a campaign, it is claimed, would slow or halt Iran's nuclear program, as it did with Iraq's nuclear program after Israel bombed its Osirak reactor in 1981. But Iran is not 1981 Iraq; it is not bogged down in a failed expansionist conflict, and it already has a sizeable civilian nuclear program, something that was initiated by Saddam Hussein *after* the Osirak bombing, not prior to it. The most likely consequence of a bombing campaign against Iranian nuclear facilities would be the expansion and acceleration of the nuclear program to reinstate its deterrence capability, meaning that Iran would not suffer the great setback the bombings would intend. 'Strategic strikes' could also provoke a military retaliation from Iran against Israel. The launch of missiles capable of reaching Israel could spark a larger conflict and possible invasion, which leads us to the third option.

The final option discussed in the mainstream media – and least likely in the near future – is a US invasion of Iran. Some analysts have openly supported this option (such as Matthew Kroenig in the most recent edition of *Foreign Affairs*<sup>2</sup> magazine), not unlike in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq. But unlike Iraq, there seems to be a distinct distaste for such an option within the US administration, the most obvious explanation for which would be an invasion hangover: with US combat troops only recently withdrawn from Iraq and a timetable in place for troops' removal from Afghanistan by 2014, the American military and general public are unlikely to support another invasion and occupation. Recent comments from US officials and news polls reflect this. An invasion would be most likely if Israel initiated a bombing campaign without American go-ahead and the Obama administration decided to militarily intervene by punishing Iran for Israel's crime. Iran's military forces are much better equipped and trained than the guerrillas of Afghanistan or the remnants of the Iraqi army, and any

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2 M Kroenig, 'Time to attack Iran', *Foreign Affairs*, 91(1), 2012: 76–86, <http://www.iraq-war.ru/article/262780>

American ‘boots on the ground’ would soon realise that fighting in the Alborz mountains poses the same difficulties that plagued the Afghanistan invasion, a scenario unlikely to be welcomed by the US military’s top commanders.

These three options for dealing with the Iranian stand-off have dominated public discussion, and so the US public are led to believe that these are the best and only conceivable options available at this time. What has been striking is that the solution of a Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone (NWFZ) has been completely left out of mainstream analysis of the escalation in tensions. Mainstream American news outlets have mentioned such a proposal sparingly, only using it as a straw man to make the case for a military campaign or a wait-and-see attitude on sanctions. To its credit *Al Jazeera* has run numerous opinion pieces – most notably by Phyllis Bennis<sup>3</sup> and Noam Chomsky<sup>4</sup> – stressing the need for a peaceful resolution through diplomacy, with a view to eventually implementing a NWFZ in the Middle East. The implementation of a NWFZ in the Middle East would mean that all the states in the region would have to become signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), cease all nuclear weapons programs, and allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors access to all civilian nuclear sites to ensure that the country in question is abiding by its obligations under the agreement.

The problem with even mentioning the possibility of a NWFZ in the Middle East is that journalists and news anchors would then be forced to examine the barriers to its implementation and the causes for tensions between Israel and most other Middle Eastern states. This would of course clash with the accepted narrative that Iran is the greatest impediment to a nuclear-free Middle East and would instead turn the focus on Israel, which is estimated currently to house in excess of 200 nuclear weapons and which refuses to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as this would open the country’s nuclear sites to investigation and regulation by the IAEA. This is the same kind of investigation Israel has

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3 P Bennis, ‘We’ve seen the threats against Iran before’, *Al Jazeera*, 18 February 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/02/201221510012473174.html>

4 N Chomsky, ‘The Iran threat’, *Al Jazeera*, 4 December 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/11/20111122142555908626.html>

been instrumental in calling for against Iran in order to hold it accountable to international law. Israel's policy of neither confirming nor denying its nuclear weapons program (a tactic called opacity) is a convenient diplomatic cover for the US and the major media outlets to downplay or ignore Israel's double standards. A nuclear Iran is of course a threat to peace in the region – nuclear weapons only increase the chance of the armageddon that fundamentalists on both sides have prophesised – but any chance of averting the reality of a nuclear-armed Iran without resorting to an illegal use of force will necessarily have to involve a discussion on Israel's nuclear weapons.

Denuclearising Iran would also have great strategic benefit for Israel in the long-term. A nuclear-armed Iran would end Israel's total hegemony in the region and restrict its ability to act without restraint. This is particularly true in regards to allies of Iran, namely Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas, the latter two having been victims of Israeli military campaigns within the last decade. If they had the backing of a nuclear power, Israel would certainly think twice before launching future campaigns against either organisation, at the risk of inviting confrontation with Iran. Although Israeli officials might talk about how Iran wants to initiate a 'second Holocaust' against the Jewish state, Israel's most immediate benefit from a strike against Iran's nuclear facilities would be the retention of regional hegemony and unchallenged conventional military power. Like any status quo power, Israel will be focused on retaining its privileged position in the Middle East, and if this requires launching or provoking a war with Iran, it is certainly not inconceivable that Tel Aviv could act without initial American backing on the assumption that it will be forthcoming if a conflict breaks out. But nuclear weapons are hardly Israel's only defence against its neighbours. Receiving the highest amount of US military aid of any country in the world, coupled with a formidable domestic arms and technology manufacturing sector, Israel is more than adequately equipped to defend itself in a conventional military conflict, as well as to initiate aggression against its neighbours, pre-emptive aggression being the core of Israeli military doctrine since 1982.

The biggest obstacle to a NWFZ therefore does not come from Iran itself, but from the country most championing an attack against it, Israel. In fact, Iran, as a member of the

Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, has agreed in principle to the implementation of a NWFZ in the Middle East. Israel, however, would most likely refuse a NWFZ if it were proposed by any conceivable actor, including the United States. In order for a NWFZ to be implemented, all Middle Eastern states would have to agree on its final form, with peaceful coexistence with each other preferable but not an absolute necessity. There are obviously grand issues that would need to be resolved before a NWFZ could be established in the Middle East, and this is one of the reasons the media prefers not to tackle it. But the fact that it is not being discussed at all by policy makers in the West and only sparsely by certain media outlets is telling in itself of how the range of acceptable solutions has been crafted by overwhelming media coverage, and all proposals outside of that spectrum are largely ignored: a narrative has been constructed and must be adhered to. Meaningful diplomacy has been almost completely sidelined on this issue (not for want of trying by Iran which has repeatedly said it is willing to return to talks), and so how can a peaceful resolution be reached under a cloud of militaristic rhetoric? The danger is that western commentators' calls for aggression against Iran will be a self-fulfilling prophecy, where a conflict is sparked and Iran expands its nuclear program to include a weapons capability in an attempt to create the ultimate form of deterrence against future attacks. Iran does not have a nuclear weapon at the current time, but that may well change if America or Israel goes ahead with the kind of military campaigns currently being discussed in the public sphere and championed by the Netanyahu government.