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Why Israel Will Not Attack Iran

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Everybody knows the scene from school: a small boy quarrels with a bigger boy. “Hold me back!” he shouts to his comrades, “Before I break his bones!”

Our government seems to be behaving in this way. Every day, via all channels, it shouts that it is going, any minute now, to break the bones of Iran.

Iran is about to produce a nuclear bomb. We cannot allow this. So we shall bomb them to smithereens.

Binyamin Netanyahu says so in every one of his countless speeches, including his opening speech at the winter session of the Knesset. Ditto Ehud Barak. Every self-respecting commentator (has anyone ever seen a non-self-respecting one?) writes about it. The media amplify the sound and the fury.

“Haaretz” splashed its front page with pictures of the seven most important ministers (the “security septet”) showing three in favor of the attack, four against.

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A German proverb says: “Revolutions that are announced in advance do not take place.” Same goes for wars.

Nuclear affairs are subject to very strict military censorship. Very very strict indeed.

Yet the censor seems to be smiling benignly. Let the boys, including the Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense (the censor’s ultimate boss) play their games.

The respected former long-serving chief of the Mossad, Meir Dagan, has publicly warned against the attack, describing it as “the most stupid idea” he has ever heard”. He explained that he considers it his duty to warn against it, in view of the plans of Netanyahu and Barak.

On Wednesday, there was a veritable deluge of leaks. Israel tested a missile that can deliver a nuclear bomb more than 5000 km away, beyond you-know-where. And our Air Force has just completed exercises in Sardinia, at a distance larger than you-know-where. And on Thursday, the Home Front Command held training exercises all over Greater Tel Aviv, with sirens screaming away.

Why Israel Will Not Attack Iran

All this seems to indicate that the whole hullabaloo is a ploy. Perhaps to frighten and deter the Iranians. Perhaps to push the Americans into more extreme actions. Perhaps coordinated with the Americans in advance. (British sources, too, leaked that the Royal Navy is training to support an American attack on Iran.)

It is an old Israeli tactic to act as if we are going crazy ("The boss has gone mad" is a routine cry in our markets, to suggest that the fruit vendor is selling at a loss.) We shall not listen to the US any more. We shall just bomb and bomb and bomb.

Well, let's be serious for a moment.

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Israel will not attack Iran. Period.

Some may think that I am going out on a limb. Shouldn't I add at least "probably" or "almost certainly"?

No, I won't. I shall repeat categorically: Israel Will NOT Attack Iran.

Since the 1956 Suez adventure, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower delivered an ultimatum that stopped the action, Israel has never undertaken any significant military operation without obtaining American consent in advance.

The US is Israel's only dependable supporter in the world (besides, perhaps, Fiji, Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau.) To destroy this relationship means cutting our lifeline. To do that, you have to be more than just a little crazy. You have to be raving mad.

Furthermore, Israel cannot fight a war without unlimited American support, because our planes and our bombs come from the US. During a war, we need supplies, spare parts, many sorts of equipment. During the Yom Kippur war, Henry Kissinger had an "air train" supplying us around the clock. And that war would probably look like a picnic compared to a war with Iran.

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Let's look at the map. That, by the way, is always recommended before starting any war.

The first feature that strikes the eye is the narrow Strait of Hormuz, through which every third barrel of the world's seaborne oil supplies flow. Almost the entire output of Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Iraq and Iran has to run the gauntlet through this narrow sea lane.

"Narrow" is an understatement. The entire width of this waterway is some 35 km (or 20 miles). That's about the distance from Gaza to Beer Sheva, which was crossed last week by the primitive rockets of the Islamic Jihad.

When the first Israeli plane enters Iranian airspace, the strait will be closed. The Iranian navy has plenty of missile

boats, but they will not be needed. Land-based missiles are enough.

The world is already teetering on the verge of an abyss. Little Greece is threatening to fall and take major chunks of the world economy with her. The elimination of almost a fifth of the industrial nations' supply of oil would lead to a catastrophe hard even to imagine.

To open the strait by force would require a major military operation (including "putting boots on the ground") that would overshadow all the US misadventures in Iraq and Afghanistan. Can the US afford that? Can NATO? Israel itself is not in the same league.

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But Israel would be very much involved in the action, if only on the receiving end.

In a rare show of unity, all of Israel's service chiefs, including the heads of the Mossad and Shin Bet, are publicly opposing the whole idea. We can only guess why.

I don't know whether the operation is possible at all. Iran is a very large country, about the size of Alaska, the nuclear installations are widely dispersed and largely underground. Even with the special deep penetration bombs provided by the US, the operation may stall the Iranian efforts – such as they are – only for a few months. The price may be too high for such meager results.

Moreover, it is quite certain that with the beginning of a war, missiles will rain down on Israel – not only from Iran, but also from Hizbollah, and perhaps also from Hamas. We have no adequate defense for our towns. The amount of death and destruction would be prohibitive.

Suddenly, the media are full of stories about our three submarines, soon to grow to five, or even six, if the Germans are understanding and generous. It is openly said that these give us the capabilities of a nuclear "second strike", if Iran uses its (still non-existent) nuclear warheads against us. But the Iranians may also use chemical and other weapons of mass destruction.

Then there is the political price. There are a lot of tensions in the Islamic world. Iran is far from popular in many parts of it. But an Israeli assault on a major Muslim country would instantly unite Sunnis and Shiites, from Egypt and Turkey to Pakistan and beyond. Israel could become a villa in a burning jungle.

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But the talk about the war serves many purposes, including domestic, political ones.

Last Saturday, the social protest movement sprang to life again. After a pause of two months, a mass of people assembled in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square. This was quite remarkable, because on that very day rockets were falling on the towns near the Gaza Strip. Until now, in such a situation demonstrations have always been canceled. Security problems trump everything else. Not this time.

Also, many people believed that the euphoria of the Gilad Shalit festival had wiped the protest from the public mind. It didn't.

By the way, something remarkable has happened: the media, after siding with the protest movement for months, have had a change of heart. Suddenly all of them, including Haaretz, are sticking knives in its back. As if by order, all newspapers wrote the next day that "more than 20,000" took part. Well I was there, and I do have some idea of these things. There were at least 100,000 people there, most of them young. I could hardly move.

The protest has not spent itself, as the media assert. Far from it. But what better means for taking people's minds off social justice than talk of the "existential danger"?

Moreover, the reforms demanded by the protesters would need money. In view of the worldwide financial crisis, the government strenuously objects to increasing the state budget, for fear of damaging our credit rating.

So where could the money come from? There are only three plausible sources: the settlements (who would dare?), the Orthodox (ditto!) and the huge military budget.

But on the eve of the most crucial war in our history, who would touch the armed forces? We need every shekel to buy more planes, more bombs, more submarines. Schools and hospitals must, alas, wait.

So God bless Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Where would we be without him?

Post-scriptum :

Uri Avnery is an Israeli writer and peace activist with Gush Shalom. He is a contributor to CounterPunch's book The Politics of Anti-Semitism.

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