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THE POTENTIAL FOR ISRAELI MILITARY ACTION AGAINST IRAN'S NUCLEAR FACILITIES

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Introduction

A new round of talks on Iran's nuclear ambitions is due to start on 13 April, probably in Geneva. It involves Iran in discussions with the "P5 + 1" group – the US, Russia, UK, China, France and Germany. The duration, direction and potential of the talks is not clear, being dependent on attitudes among the participants, but it is a positive development. Israel is not directly involved, but it is likely that, as the talks get under way, there will be a diminished risk of Israel taking unilateral and early military action against Iran. That may change abruptly should the talks fail.

Oxford Research Group (ORG) has previously analysed the nature and possible outcomes of a war involving Iran, including a detailed briefing (*Iran: Consequences of a War*, February, 2006) and a more recent assessment, specifically concerned with possible Israeli action (*The Long-term Consequences of an Israeli Attack in Iran*, November 2011). The February 2012 briefing in this series (*The Political Context of the Iran Crisis*) analysed the current state of tension in terms of the political environments in three key countries, the United States, Iran and Israel.

One of the key issues in the current context is whether Israel has the military capability to damage Iranian nuclear weapons potential, and a number of recent public domain analyses point to considerable difficulties that Israel would have in staging such an attack. These relate essentially to the long range at which Israeli forces would be operating, the number and dispersal of Iranian nuclear facilities and the degree of protection at some of the most sensitive sites.

This briefing suggests otherwise and presents a brief analysis of three key issues:

- **Preparedness**

- **Targeting options in relation to overall aim**
- **Forward operating bases**

Preparedness

For well over a decade, the Israeli military posture has focused on two main security threats in addition to Gaza and the West Bank. One is the development of Hezbollah into a robust opponent in southern Lebanon, made worse by the failure of Israeli forces to suppress the organisation in 2006. This has resulted in numerous tactical and weapons developments to ensure Hezbollah can be defeated should there be a renewed conflict.

The other is the risk of a nuclear-armed Iran. Since Iran is regarded as the one potential existential threat to Israel, this has been a motive for intense activity in preparing for war. This has, in turn, focused on two themes, the deployment of a national missile defence system (the "Iron Dome") and the development of the means to attack Iran.

The attack option has involved multiple programmes, including the acquisition of more than 120 long-range F-15I and F-16I strike aircraft, with cutting edge Israeli avionics, much improved aerial refuelling, extensive ballistic and cruise missile deployments, and intensive production of drones. Armed and reconnaissance drones have been central features of the Israeli weapons industry for many years, and Israel is second only to the United States in this field. Of particular relevance is the deployment of the Heron family of drones, particularly the new long-range Eitan with a 2,000 kg payload and 24-hour endurance.

The key point here is that the Israeli military, especially the Air Force, has been preparing for war with Iran for many years and has developed a wide range of capabilities. Indeed, it has recent experience of long-range offensive operations, including the strikes against Hezbollah-bound weapons convoys near Port Sudan in early 2009 at a range of 1,300 km.

Striking Iranian targets does mean operating in an adverse combat environment, but Israel has invested heavily in electronic counter-measures, especially air defence suppression, and is helped in this regard by its relationship with the United States. This military relationship greatly increased from late December 2003, when the US military, faced with a formidable and unexpected urban insurgency in Iraq, turned to the Israeli Defence Force for advice and direct assistance. Since then, it has been even more cooperative with Israel in the provision of advanced technologies.

Targeting Options

Iran's nuclear facilities are dispersed across much of the west of the country. Furthermore, Iran is particularly expert in the production of Ultra-High Performance Concrete (UHPC), widely used in earthquake zones, but also of use in protecting high value targets. Even if Israel was provided with the US Air Force's Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP), which is much more powerful than Israel's current bunker attack ordnance, it is not clear that the MOP could handle some UHPC-protected sites.

This is one reason why some recent analyses emphasise the problems for Israel. But they partially miss the point. They assume that destruction of, for example, an enrichment plant, would not have a lasting effect in setting back Iran's nuclear potential because it could quickly be rebuilt. While these and other sites may well be attacked, much of the emphasis will be on knowledge and capability. This means that major targets are likely to include advanced training facilities and their staff, especially relevant university centres, as well as research and development centres for both the nuclear and missile programmes.

Advanced manufacturing plants and the facilities that actually make the machine tools for those plants will be important as will be key scientists, technologists, managers and leaders. This is expected to have two effects.

- Destroy knowledge and capability rather than concentrating on plant.
- Discourage others from replacing those killed.

Generally in war, targeters look much wider than specific targets, at what makes those targets important and how they can rapidly be replaced. Targeting post-attack recovery capabilities is standard practice, with emphasis on personnel.

In Israel's case, the April 2002 military strikes against the Palestine National Authority specifically targeted the capability of the Authority to recover, including singling out the Ministries of Local Government and Education and the Palestinian Bureau of Statistics.

In Cast Lead in Gaza, one of the main targets was the Engineering Faculty at the University, and one of the first was a passing out parade of police cadets, killing as many as possible, as well as their trainers. This undermined the ability of Hamas to maintain order, as well as undermining the morale of the police.

In some ways to raise this issue is unfair to the Israelis, because we are dealing with SOP (standard operating procedure) of any major military, evidenced historically repeatedly in World War II and in conflicts since, as well as in nuclear targeting throughout the Cold War.

What is rarely recognised is that the chain of assassinations of Iranian nuclear personnel in recent years has been aimed partly at disrupting the actual work of those killed, but also at inducing fear in others involved in the programme. This is very likely why some of those assassinated have not been especially high up – the killing of middle-ranking personnel means that many more people in the nuclear programme see themselves at risk.

Once Israel strikes Iranian nuclear facilities, those involved in the entire programme will know that further attacks may well happen in the months and years that follow, and that the nature of the initial operation will mean that hundreds or even thousands of people will be fearful for their futures. In psychological terms, this may well be one of the principle aims of the whole operation.

Forward Operating Bases

Almost all the public source analysis of likely Israeli attack options assumes operations conducted at long range from Israel. This again misses the point in that Israeli forces have three main options for forward operating bases. Because of its fear of Iran, Saudi Arabia would see advantages in an Israeli attack. While it would be highly unlikely to allow Israel to base strike aircraft on its territory, facilities for drones, reconnaissance aircraft and even tanker aircraft are another matter. With the United States no longer controlling Iraqi air space, Saudi Arabia is well suited to aiding aircraft and drones making use of that air space.

Israeli military personnel have been assiduous in recent years in developing close links with the Kurds of North-East Iraq, including extensive programmes of training Peshmerga paramilitaries. Israel is reported to have surveillance facilities in Kurdish Iraq directed against Iran and, in the event of a war, could readily undertake drone deployments, Special Forces insertions, use of search and rescue aircraft, and other operations.

Most significant of all though, and least recognised, is Israel's careful and long-term nurturing of a close relationship with Azerbaijan (on February 26, a \$1.6 billion deal was concluded for Israel to supply a wide range of arms - including drones, anti-aircraft, and missile defence systems). It is one of the anomalies of the region that Iran has long sided with Christian Armenia against Moslem Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, but Israel has made the most of Azerbaijan's consequent perception of vulnerability. Azerbaijan is particularly well-placed as a forward operating base for diverse Israeli systems, one likely location being the large Soviet-era air base at Baku Kala with its 2,500 metre runway and extensive hard standings. A 2010 satellite image showed 30 helicopters and six transport aircraft on the base, occupying barely half the available space.

Azeri politicians have recently stated that they would not be supportive of Israeli action against Iran, but there are sound domestic and international political reasons for saying

this, whatever the levels of cooperation that would actually be allowed in the event of a war.

Conclusion

An Israeli attack on Iran will be singularly difficult, but these three aspects – many years of preparation, diverse targeting options, and the availability of forward operating bases must be recognised in assessing the probability of a war and the positive impact for Israel that its military planners may argue that it can have. An attack would have a much wider target set than commonly assumed, leading to numerous civilian casualties. Azerbaijan's probable involvement would have implications for regional security, with the risk of Iranian retaliation against Azerbaijan, and Armenia taking advantage of this. More generally, the broadly-based nature of an Israeli military operation, including attacks on relevant nuclear training and research facilities, and factories, would make it more likely that even an unpopular Iranian government would get strong domestic support in determining its responses.

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