



# POLICY OPTIONS IN THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR CRISIS

*Natalie Verständig*

*As reports circle of an advanced Iranian nuclear program, different policy options are considered by Israeli and American policy-makers. While officials in Jerusalem seem convinced that the military option is the only way in which they can defend themselves, Washington is sending ambiguous signals to its Middle Eastern ally. But with the risk of regional war breaking out, the United States should do everything it can in order to avoid unpleasant surprises.*

“Surprise is one of the secrets of success.” Those were the words of Meir Amit on May 25, 1967. As the head of the Mossad, he was desperately trying to explain to John Hadden, the CIA station chief in Tel Aviv, why launching a preemptive attack against the amassing Egyptian forces in the Sinai was unavoidable and essential. The Americans remained unconvinced, and President Lyndon B. Johnson and his advisers repeatedly asked the Israeli leaders not to surprise them. But when Amit met with Defense Secretary Robert McNamara in Washington on June 1, he was told to “go home, that is where you are needed now,” which is exactly what he did. Forty-five years have passed since Israel received a “flickering green light” from the Americans and launched the six-day long war that changed the course of Middle Eastern history. Today it is difficult not to note the strong resemblance to the building of tensions between Israel and the U.S. on the one hand and Iran on the other, and the discourse taking place between Israeli and American officials over the possibility of an attack. Several prominent Israeli policy-makers and intelligence officials have stated that Iran’s nuclear program indeed poses an existential threat to the Jewish state and, in the words of Israel’s Minister of Strategic Affairs Moshe Ya’alon, “we are prepared to defend ourselves in any way and anywhere that we see fit.” Such rhetoric has caused great concern around the world that Israel may indeed strike Iran in 2012.

## Considering the Options

There are three possible scenarios. In the first scenario, U.S. and EU diplomatic efforts succeed in bringing about a ne-

gotiated settlement with Iran. In a second scenario, diplomatic efforts fail, but Israel and the U.S. refrain from taking military action, thereby deciding to live with a nuclear Iran. In a third scenario, Israel, either alone or together with the U.S., launches air strikes against Iranian nuclear sites in an attempt to destroy its nuclear program to the point that it will not be rebuilt.

Assuming that a military attack would be successful, potential Iranian retaliation still needs to be taken into account. Tehran’s retaliation would most probably include blocking the Strait of Hormuz, causing large-scale damage to the world’s oil markets, as well as sanctioning worldwide terror attacks against U.S. and Israeli targets. For some these might seem like short-term losses necessary to absorb in order to avoid the long-term defeats a nuclear Iran could entail; including the proliferation of nuclear weapons to neighboring states and the resulting limitations such a scenario would pose to U.S. freedom of action in the Middle East.

However, the question remains whether or not such an attack would actually succeed in halting the Iranian nuclear program and destroying the uranium-enrichment facilities to the point where Iranian leaders see no point in trying to rebuild. There are several difficulties associated with a potential attack. First of all, there is a possibility that Iran has nuclear facilities in addition to those that the U.S. and Israel are already aware of. Iran has previously concealed the existence of secret nuclear sites, for example those in Natanz and Qom, suggesting that the country’s leaders would not be foreign to the idea of obscuring facilities to Western inspectors. Also, in order to protect their nuclear



program from attacks, the Iranians have buried some of their facilities deep underground. The Pentagon has sought to construct a bomb forceful enough to penetrate such underground facilities, but recent reports suggest that initial tests indicate that the Massive Ordnance Penetrator, specifically constructed for this purpose, is not yet capable of destroying all existing Iranian facilities. Moreover, many of the Iranian nuclear plants are purposefully constructed in close proximity to civilian centers, increasing the risk for high numbers of large-scale casualties in case of an attack.

Taking into consideration all these factors complicating a potential U.S. or Israeli raid, it seems that it is uncertain whether an attack with only a few air strikes would succeed in eliminating the Iranian nuclear program without getting involved in a full-scale invasion. Even if an attack with U.S. support would have a higher likelihood of succeeding than a lone Israeli operation, due to the U.S.'s stronger military capability, there are still too many obstacles and uncertainties that could prevent an attack from having the desired outcome.

The alternative to the military option is continuing with diplomatic efforts, using sanctions to convince Tehran to come to the negotiation table. According to President Obama's former Middle East advisor Dennis Ross sanctions are indeed working and have the potential of affecting Iran's behavior as "right now they are under pressure they have not been under before." However, there are indications that the sanctions are not as successful as Ross might want to portray them. The U.S. and the EU have put pressure on the regime in Tehran for years without any concrete results; according to an IAEA report from November last year, Iran has even started developing nuclear warheads and missiles. Indeed, many U.S. officials believe that sanctions are failing, and only serving the purpose of delaying an Israeli attack and appeasing European policy-makers who oppose resorting to military means before all other options

are exhausted. Even U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta has recently said that Iran has the capability of developing nuclear weapons within a year, and that the U.S. "will take whatever steps are necessary to stop them."

## The Need for Clarity

Statements such as that from Panetta are likely to embolden Israeli leaders in their stance on Iran. Lately we have heard top officials, like Ya'alon and Defense Minister Ehud Barak, speaking about the imminent danger of a nuclear Iran and Israel's right to defend itself in the face of an existential threat. But while U.S. official rhetoric might have approached that of Israeli leaders, the Americans are still far from convinced that an attack is the right option. In this sense, the situation is similar to that in 1967, diplomatic efforts appear to have failed, but the U.S., already being involved in wars elsewhere (then in Vietnam, now in Afghanistan), is doing everything it can to avoid having to resort to military force. Meanwhile, if there is anything we can learn from history, it is that Israel will stop at nothing to defend itself against any perceived threats. This time, however, instead of the "flickering green light" it might be advisable for the Americans to be direct with the Israelis, giving a clear green or a red light, in order to avoid unpleasant surprises.

*Natalie Verständig is a Junior Research Fellow at the Institute for Security and Development Policy.*

*The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Security and Development Policy or its sponsors.*

### ABOUT ISDP

*The Institute for Security and Development Policy is a Stockholm-based independent and non-profit research and policy institute. The Institute is dedicated to expanding understanding of international affairs, particularly the interrelationship between the issue areas of conflict, security and development. The Institute's primary areas of geographic focus are Asia and Europe's neighborhood.*

WEBSITE: [WWW.ISDP.EU](http://WWW.ISDP.EU)