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ISRAEL, IRAN AND THE NUCLEAR ISSUE

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Introduction

Oxford Research Group's analysis of the risk of war with Iran has included a detailed paper on the possible consequences of a war (*Iran: Consequences of a War*, February 2006) and two previous briefings in this series (*Drift to War*, October 2007, and *Israel and Iran – A Risk of Crisis*, June 2008). The broad conclusion of the 2006 paper was that a conflict between the United States and Iran would be deeply destabilising for the region, would hold the prospect of an extended conflict and would, in the long run, make Iran more likely to acquire nuclear weapons. The October 2007 briefing developed this assessment in the light of what was then a high level of tension between the Bush administration and the Ahmadinejad government in Tehran. These tensions eased in the following months and there were even reports that the Bush administration was opposed to Israeli military action against Iran. Bearing in mind that an Israeli attack on Iran would most likely involve strike aircraft flying over Iraqi air space controlled by the United States, this limited Israeli options for military action.

In the briefing for June 2008, the main focus was on Israeli/Iranian relations, primarily because of major concerns being expressed within Israel over strong anti-Zionism statements coming from Iran. There was an underlying belief that it would be fundamentally unacceptable to Israel for Iran to become a nuclear power. Israel's unequivocal position was that it must remain the only nuclear-armed state in the region, and that if there were clear indications that Iran was committed to developing nuclear weapons then all means to prevent this had to be considered, including military action.

Furthermore, there were substantial concerns in Israel that the US Presidential Election campaign might result in the election of Barack Obama. In spite of traditional support for Israel from US Democrats, the Obama campaign was prominent in focusing on a military withdrawal from Iraq and also gave some signs of being prepared to enter negotiations with Iran.

Underlying all this was the recognition among some thoughtful Israeli analysts that automatic support for Israel from the United States could not be taken for granted. Two demographic changes in the United States were relevant here. One was the relative decline in the proportion of the population that was of a traditional protestant persuasion and the rise of the Hispanic community with less intrinsic interest in Israel. The other and arguably more important trend was that the generation of Americans that had grown up with strong memories of the "David versus Goliath" narrative of the 1967 Six Day War was slowly being replaced by a politically active generation that did not retain that innate support for Israel.

In the context of the election campaign, the June 2008 briefing suggested that:

"The Israeli nightmare is of an independently-minded President Obama, a war-weary America wanting to reduce its presence in the Middle East, a decline in support for Israel and, worst of all, a possible willingness to accept that a nuclear-armed Iran is probable within a few years and that this has to be accepted, however reluctantly."

The briefing therefore expressed concern over the risk of a pre-emptive attack on Iran before the US election or between the election outcome and the inauguration. In the event, Israel was instead involved in a major conflict in Gaza. This had an indirect relevance to Iran, given the claims of substantial Iranian support for Hamas. From Israel's perspective, the three-week Gaza War did not succeed in stopping rocket attacks into southern Israel, nor did it irreversibly damage Hamas. The War was followed by a general election that brought the right-wing government of Binyamin Netanyahu to power, with the

appointment of Avigdor Lieberman to the post of Foreign Minister. The new administration immediately made it clear that it was opposed to a two-state solution to the Israel/Palestine conflict and considered the status of Iran's nuclear weapons programme to be its main security concern.

New Tensions in Israel

There are several factors that give rise to a concern that the risk of a war is once again increasing. On the Israeli side, the new government is forceful in its insistence that Iran is the key issue and is far more important than negotiations with Palestinians. It is unlikely that the Obama administration is sympathetic to this view, and is currently more concerned with starting a degree of diplomatic engagement with Tehran. This is of considerable concern to the Israeli government and was demonstrated by the central focus on the Iran issue at the recent annual meeting of the influential America Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in Washington.

It is not just the possibility of Iran having nuclear weapons that concerns the Netanyahu government – the Iranian missile programme is also relevant. One of the effects of the 2006 war with Hezbollah, as well as the more recent Gaza War, is the vulnerability that many Israelis feel in relation to missile attacks. Those recent experiences involved small unguided rockets that rarely caused casualties but this was a sharp reminder of the Iraqi Scud missile attacks in 1991 that had a major impact on the Israeli sense of national insecurity. Furthermore, Israeli security sources persistently claim that some of the Hezbollah and Hamas missiles originate in Iran, especially the more sophisticated variants.

Israel has recently made it clear in other actions that it will go to substantial lengths to maintain its security, including the use of long-range air power. As well as the attack on a Syrian military facility which was claimed to be nuclear-related, the Israeli Air Force has staged several raids on targets in eastern Sudan. Unofficial yet reasonably reliable reports suggest that the targets have been convoys of armaments being taken from Port Sudan along the coast, transiting into Egypt and then being taken through to western Sinai where they are smuggled into Gaza in tunnels under the Philadelphi Corridor. The Sudan raids were carried out over distances in excess of 1,300 kilometres – close to the range required to hit most of Iran's nuclear facilities.

The Iranian Context

Although the Israeli government regards Iran's presumed nuclear ambitions as its greatest security threat, it is currently unlikely that Israel will undertake military action. This would meet considerable opposition from the Obama administration, and any attempt to force passage through US-controlled Iraqi air space would be likely to result in a major crisis in Israeli-American relations. What would almost certainly change this situation was if Iran was to test a nuclear device. There are technical, political and consequential aspects to this possibility.

In terms of the technical context, Iran now has several hundred kilograms of low-enriched uranium as a result of many months of operation of its centrifuge cascades. Iran's current enrichment activities are rather low grade and out-dated. However, more efficient systems are being developed and, in any case, the current systems do produce low-enriched uranium, even if at considerable cost. It would be technically possible for Iran to further enrich the uranium to the point where there would be sufficient weapons-grade uranium to construct a small and relatively crude nuclear device. Nuclear weapons based on uranium are technically less advanced than the much more common plutonium-based implosion systems, and Iran probably has the technical capabilities to construct such a device. In all probability it would involve a low yield underground test and would take around six to twelve months to develop from the point at which the decision had been made to enrich supplies of low-enriched uranium.

In political terms, Mr Ahmadinejad intends to stand for re-election to the Presidency in June. He will be doing so at a time of continuing economic problems including rising unemployment and inflation, the

former arising primarily from the severe decline in oil and gas prices – Iran’s main sources of external income. Given that the global economic downturn is likely to persist for several years, and with it a trend towards low energy prices, the domestic economic prospects for Iran do not look good. There is a country-wide belief that Iran, with its 3,000-year history and a 70+ million population, has a claim to being a major power on the world stage. There is a particular concern with demonstrating modernity, even alongside a conservative theocratic tradition, and the civil nuclear programme is clearly part of this.

On the nuclear weapon issue, Iran looks to India and Pakistan as existing nuclear powers with regional prestige, and even more so to North Korea where the acquisition of a minimal nuclear arsenal has increased the country’s bargaining position. At a time of potential engagement with the United States, it can readily be argued that a small-scale nuclear demonstration would make Washington far more likely to engage in substantial negotiations, weakening Israel’s influence with the Obama administration as well as its regional standing. Perhaps more significant is the value of such a test in diverting public attention away from the formidable problems of the domestic economy. This might be more likely if Mr Ahmadinejad wins the election in June, but might also apply to another President, given that it is the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is dominant in matters concerned with security and foreign policy. There is some risk that the decision to build and test a device before June’s election has been taken, primarily to increase Mr Ahmadinejad’s popularity and help ensure victory.

Finally, there are the consequential aspects of a nuclear test. If a test were conducted it would utilise just about all the enriched uranium that could be produced from current stocks. It would not be remotely equivalent to a deliverable nuclear weapon, and it would then take Iran some years to develop a nuclear arsenal of ten or more usable weapons. This would not necessarily be the point however. The Iranians could take the decision to demonstrate in an unequivocal manner their capacity to develop nuclear weapons if they choose to do so in the future. This would be analogous to India’s exploding of what was termed a “peaceful” nuclear device in 1974, some years before an arsenal was produced. In the Iranian context, it would consolidate their position in the region and would be based on a reading of the new Obama administration that the United States would reluctantly have to accept the reality of Iran’s nuclear status. There would be a presumption in Tehran that direct US military action against an Iranian nuclear programme would be highly unlikely given Washington’s preoccupation with Afghanistan and Pakistan and its recognition that Iran has the capacity to cause serious difficulties for US forces in Iraq just as most of them are due to be withdrawn.

Potential for a Crisis

The two substantial factors that underlie a concern over the risk of crisis relate to domestic circumstances in Israel and Iran. The new Israeli government is hawkish in a country in which the political culture is that security comes through overwhelming military strength. It is a government that is worried about recent US political changes and even more concerned over the status of Iran. Meanwhile, elements in the Iranian leadership may now believe that a nuclear test, however crude, would be popular at home and would improve Iran’s position in negotiations with the United States at a time when a hostile response from the United States would be unlikely.

What is far from certain is the nature of Israel’s response to an Iranian nuclear test. The central factor is that the Netanyahu government has made the Iranian nuclear programme such a core part of its security posture that to do nothing in the face of an Iranian nuclear test would severely affect its credibility. For this reason alone, it is likely that there would be a military response. A key issue would then be whether the Obama administration would countenance Israeli air movements across Iraq, bearing in mind that Israeli has the military capacity only to delay an Iranian nuclear weapons programme, not irreversibly destroy it. From Washington’s perspective, Israeli military action would almost certainly be guaranteed to ensure Iranian determination to develop an operational nuclear arsenal as quickly as possible.

The core issue here is that US opposition may not be enough to restrain Israel – there are other possibilities. One would be to ignore US opposition and over-fly Iraq. Intercepting Israeli strike aircraft en route to Iran would be an enormously high-risk decision for the Obama administration. Alternatively, given that the regional Arab response to an Iranian nuclear test would be of deep concern, Israel might well be in a position to take the feasible if difficult option of routing a military option over Jordanian and Saudi air space. It is also worth noting that Israel has close military links with Kurdish Iraq and Georgia.

Conclusion

There have been several occasions over the past four years when there has been concern over the risk of a confrontation with Iran, involving either the United States or Israel. It has to be said that on each occasion the tensions have eased, and there is therefore the risk of “crying wolf” in raising the issue once again. Even so, the factors analysed in this briefing do indicate that we are entering a period of particular risk. As such, it is appropriate to examine the situation to help ensure that there is a willingness to respond to what might be an unexpected and very difficult situation.

An Iranian nuclear test and the Israeli response that might follow would lead to a singularly dangerous situation. It follows that there is an urgent need to greatly improve the levels of dialogue between the different parties. This is an aspect of diplomatic engagement that is simply not getting the emphasis it deserves. While international attention is inevitably focused on the crisis in Pakistan, a new and equally dangerous moment of crisis may be imminent in the Israel-Iran confrontation.

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