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# Is military action right course on Iran?

By James Klurfeld  
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There is increasing speculation that Israel will attack Iran's nuclear sites before the year is out.

The respected Israeli historian Benny Morris recently wrote in The New York Times saying that such an attack could come in the next four to seven months and that if it fails to deal with Iran's nuclear program it would almost certainly lead to an Israeli-Iranian nuclear exchange.

Shmuel Rosner, the chief diplomatic correspondent for the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, wrote in the New Republic that politicians across the Israeli spectrum have been coming to the conclusion that an attack on nuclear sites would be the only way to convince the world to make a serious, tough-minded diplomatic effort to force Tehran's leaders to abandon Iran's nuclear weapons program. That is, the attack would have a diplomatic purpose more than a military purpose.

This is all pretty scary. But there is an underlying assumption by those, both here and in Israel, who believe a military attack on Iran's nuclear program is a viable option that needs much closer examination. That assumption is that the traditional concept of nuclear deterrence will not work with Iran.

The Iranian regime is run by such a group of fanatics, goes this line of thinking, that its leaders are willing to risk the nuclear destruction of their nation by launching a nuclear attack on Israel. The fact that the United States and Soviet Union never launched a nuclear war, despite having thousands of warheads aimed at each other over more than four decades, is not a valid comparison, they say. The Soviets were more rational, more conservative, less of risk takers.

Of course, this conclusion about the Soviets is made only after the Cold War has ended. It ignores the reality that for many years and for many U.S. officials and politicians the Soviet Union was the incarnation of evil, the Red Menace, the Evil Empire. Remember Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev banging his shoe on the podium of the United Nations, dread concern about a "missile gap," and cringing under our desks at school in preparation of a nuclear attack?

The argument for a preventive attack on Iran's nuclear sites because deterrence will not work against such a fanatical regime sounds familiar. It was a key argument that was made by proponents of a preventive attack against Iraq in 2002 and 2003. Saddam Hussein was an inveterate risk taker. Deterrence wouldn't work. We couldn't wait for him to get the bomb. Maybe there is still some merit in that argument, but the unintended consequences of an attack should be more obvious now. And one of those consequences was making Iran the most powerful nation in the Persian Gulf region. And the preventive attack on Iraq may also have given Iran an incentive to develop its own nuclear weapons to prevent - deter - such an attack on its soil.

What was the long-term impact of Israel's 1981 attack on Iraq's nuclear reactor? Did it buy valuable time for the region or did it give Saddam Hussein greater incentive to develop his nuclear program? What would be the long-term consequences on Iran? Would it make it more likely the world could pressure the regime into stopping its nuclear program? Or less?

Clearly, there's very little to admire about the Iranian regime. But is it so fanatical that, if all else fails, deterrence won't work? At least consider this: Iran has never been a front line combatant against Israel. It is a Persian state, not an Arabic nation. Its rhetoric against Israel since the 1979 fall of the Shah of Iran has been extreme. No doubt about that. But it has never directly attacked Israel even while it supports surrogates who have. And before 1979 Israel had a relationship with Iran, albeit largely unreported.

The better option, of course, would be for Iran to give up its nuclear program. There has been a fierce battle going on in that country for years now between forces of moderation and modernization and the theocrats. Is this really the right time to turn to the military option?

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