The next ‘big operation’?

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The public debate about an attack on Iran ignores how regional changes that have transpired in recent years affect the thinking of Ehud Barak and Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu and Barak are well informed about the issues that dominate public discussion: the risks faced by Israel as a result of Iran’s development of nuclear weapons, the extent to which a military attack would damage Iranian capability, and, of course, the price Israel would pay as a result of military responses from Iran and Hezbollah.

As far as Netanyahu and Barak are concerned, Iranian nuclear capability poses an immediate, existential threat to Israel. However, the question of whether, how and when to launch an attack depends on an array of broader calculations. Such considerations are weighed in accord with this pair’s perceptions of the dangers Israel will face in the medium and long term. As Barak and Netanyahu see it, the dangers have become more serious as a result of regional changes: the Moslem Brotherhood triumph in Egypt, the chance that an Islamic regime will take root in Syria following the removal of Bashar Assad, the chance that Jordan’s regime will follow the path of Tunisia’s, Libya’s and Egypt’s, and the influence of regime changes in the Arab world upon Hamas in the territories. These dangers are compounded by the weakening of Israel’s deterrence power following its failures in the Second Lebanon War, and its failure to bring about the ousting of Hamas’ regime in the Gaza Strip via Operation Cast Lead.

Netanyahu and Barak thus face a problem that goes beyond finding a way to prevent Iran from passing the nuclear threshold. They are troubled by the need to revive Israel’s deterrent capability in view of the new regional challenges and dangers. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that Netanyahu and Barak will not decide to attack Iran unless they feel that such a strike would deliver a lethal blow to Iran’s nuclear program, or at least require Tehran to spend a long period of years repairing the damage.

Does Israel have the wherewithal to deliver such a lethal, or near-lethal, blow? That’s the billion-dollar question. But it would be hazardous to assume that the attack threats made by Netanyahu and Barak are empty bluster whose purpose is to pressure the international community into toughening anti-Iranian sanctions. Empty threats erode deterrence capability more than the absence of threats, and Netanyahu and Barak are well aware of this. Their willingness to publicly confront domestic and overseas opponents of a military strike bears witness to the seriousness of their intentions.

Moreover, it’s possible that the attack model which the two are promoting is more ambitious and sweeping than the descriptions that appear in the media. It’s reasonable to assume that they are thinking of a broader military action in which a strike on Iranian nuclear installations would only represent the pull of the trigger in a wide-ranging showdown. Such an attack model would be comprised of a number of components: first, a broad military action to destroy Iran’s nuclear installations that would include, perhaps, ground forces, and also an assault aimed at destroying, or at least causing heavy damage to, Iran’s missile batteries. On its own, an air strike would not meet these objectives. Netanyahu and Barak have personal military backgrounds that include ground actions on enemy territory; and they are skeptical with regard to the ability of an air attack to achieve, on its own, Israel’s goals. Also, any response taken by Hezbollah, even a very limited response, would precipitate a sweeping military action in Lebanon aimed at bringing an end, once and for all, to Hezbollah’s military capability, and perhaps also its political clout in Lebanon. In this context as well, Israel would likely launch a mixed ground-sea-air war. In addition, Israel might also launch a military assault on Hamas in Gaza, one whose goals would be comparable to the move in Lebanon.

This is a very ambition plan fraught with high risks. Should it fail in full, or even in part, Israel would pay an excruciatingly steep political, economic and human price. But, as Netanyahu and Barak see it, the war’s success would significantly strengthen Israel’s deterrence capability, and also curb the desire of potential rivals to sabotage peace agreements or initiate a war in the future.

In order to maximize effect, the multi-dimensional war would have to be launched before the new government consolidates in Egypt, prior to the end of the civil war in Syria and before the elections in the United States; the presidential campaign imposes pressures on the two candidates who are wrestling for the Jewish vote.

There is, of course, another possible way of breaking out of an increasingly constricting strategic dilemma: by initiating peace talks with the Palestinians, while also promoting a path to a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction. But such an option is not in the repertoire of the current government. As in the case of past governments, this one believes that the motto “victory goes to the bold” applies only to military courage and initiative. Diplomatic daring is not seen as being relevant in this region.

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