

## **Point of No Return**

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For the Obama administration, the prospect of a nuclearized Iran is dismal to contemplate — it would create major new national-security challenges and crush the president’s dream of ending nuclear proliferation. But the view from Jerusalem is still more dire: a nuclearized Iran represents, among other things, a threat to Israel’s very existence. In the gap between Washington’s and Jerusalem’s views of Iran lies the question: who, if anyone, will stop Iran before it goes nuclear, and how? As Washington and Jerusalem study each other intensely, here’s an inside look at the strategic calculations on both sides—and at how, if things remain on the current course, an Israeli air strike will unfold.

IT IS POSSIBLE that at some point in the next 12 months, the imposition of devastating economic sanctions on the Islamic Republic of Iran will persuade its leaders to cease their pursuit of nuclear weapons. It is also possible that Iran’s reform-minded Green Movement will somehow replace the mullah-led regime, or at least discover the means to temper the regime’s ideological extremism. It is possible, as well, that “foiling operations” conducted by the intelligence agencies of Israel, the United States, Great Britain, and other Western powers—programs designed to subvert the Iranian nuclear effort through sabotage and, on occasion, the carefully engineered disappearances of nuclear scientists—will have hindered Iran’s progress in some significant way. It is also possible that President Obama, who has said on more than a few occasions that he finds the prospect of a nuclear Iran “unacceptable,” will order a military strike against the country’s main weapons and uranium-enrichment facilities.

But none of these things—least of all the notion that Barack Obama, for whom initiating new wars in the Middle East is not a foreign-policy goal, will soon order the American military into action against Iran—seems, at this moment, terribly likely. What is more likely, then, is that one day next spring, the Israeli national-security adviser, Uzi Arad, and the Israeli defense minister, Ehud Barak, will simultaneously telephone their counterparts at the White House and the Pentagon, to inform them that their prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has just ordered roughly one hundred F-15Es, F-16Is, F-16Cs, and other aircraft of the Israeli air force to fly east toward Iran—possibly by crossing Saudi Arabia, possibly by threading the border between Syria and Turkey, and possibly by traveling directly through Iraq’s airspace, though it is crowded with American aircraft. (It’s so crowded, in fact, that the United States Central Command, whose area of responsibility is the greater Middle East, has already asked the Pentagon what to do should Israeli aircraft invade its airspace. According to multiple sources, the answer came back: do not shoot them down.)

In these conversations, which will be fraught, the Israelis will tell their American counterparts that they are taking this drastic step because a nuclear Iran poses the gravest threat since Hitler to the physical survival of the Jewish people. The Israelis will also state that they believe they have a reasonable chance of delaying the Iranian nuclear

program for at least three to five years. They will tell their American colleagues that Israel was left with no choice. They will not be asking for permission, because it will be too late to ask for permission.

When the Israelis begin to bomb the uranium-enrichment facility at Natanz, the formerly secret enrichment site at Qom, the nuclear-research center at Esfahan, and possibly even the Bushehr reactor, along with the other main sites of the Iranian nuclear program, a short while after they depart en masse from their bases across Israel—regardless of whether they succeed in destroying Iran’s centrifuges and warhead and missile plants, or whether they fail miserably to even make a dent in Iran’s nuclear program—they stand a good chance of changing the Middle East forever; of sparking lethal reprisals, and even a full-blown regional war that could lead to the deaths of thousands of Israelis and Iranians, and possibly Arabs and Americans as well; of creating a crisis for Barack Obama that will dwarf Afghanistan in significance and complexity; of rupturing relations between Jerusalem and Washington, which is Israel’s only meaningful ally; of inadvertently solidifying the somewhat tenuous rule of the mullahs in Tehran; of causing the price of oil to spike to cataclysmic highs, launching the world economy into a period of turbulence not experienced since the autumn of 2008, or possibly since the oil shock of 1973; of placing communities across the Jewish diaspora in mortal danger, by making them targets of Iranian-sponsored terror attacks, as they have been in the past, in a limited though already lethal way; and of accelerating Israel’s conversion from a once-admired refuge for a persecuted people into a leper among nations.

If a strike does succeed in crippling the Iranian nuclear program, however, Israel, in addition to possibly generating some combination of the various catastrophes outlined above, will have removed from its list of existential worries the immediate specter of nuclear-weaponized, theologically driven, eliminationist anti-Semitism; it may derive for itself the secret thanks (though the public condemnation) of the Middle East’s moderate Arab regimes, all of which fear an Iranian bomb with an intensity that in some instances matches Israel’s; and it will have succeeded in countering, in militant fashion, the spread of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, which is, not irrelevantly, a prime goal of the enthusiastic counter-proliferator who currently occupies the White House.

I AM NOT ENGAGING in a thought exercise, or a one-man war game, when I discuss the plausibility and potential consequences of an Israeli strike on Iran. Israel has twice before successfully attacked and destroyed an enemy’s nuclear program. In 1981, Israeli warplanes bombed the Iraqi reactor at Osirak, halting—forever, as it turned out—Saddam Hussein’s nuclear ambitions; and in 2007, Israeli planes destroyed a North Korean-built reactor in Syria. An attack on Iran, then, would be unprecedented only in scope and complexity.

I have been exploring the possibility that such a strike will eventually occur for more than seven years, since my first visit to Tehran, where I attempted to understand both the Iranian desire for nuclear weapons and the regime’s theologically motivated desire to see the Jewish state purged from the Middle East, and especially since March of 2009, when I had an extended discussion about the Iranian nuclear program with Benjamin

Netanyahu, hours before he was sworn in as Israel's prime minister. In the months since then, I have interviewed roughly 40 current and past Israeli decision makers about a military strike, as well as many American and Arab officials. In most of these interviews, I have asked a simple question: what is the percentage chance that Israel will attack the Iranian nuclear program in the near future? Not everyone would answer this question, but a consensus emerged that there is a better than 50 percent chance that Israel will launch a strike by next July. (Of course, it is in the Israeli interest to let it be known that the country is considering military action, if for no other reason than to concentrate the attention of the Obama administration. But I tested the consensus by speaking to multiple sources both in and out of government, and of different political parties. Citing the extraordinary sensitivity of the subject, most spoke only reluctantly, and on condition of anonymity. They were not part of some public-relations campaign.) The reasoning offered by Israeli decision makers was uncomplicated: Iran is, at most, one to three years away from having a breakout nuclear capability (often understood to be the capacity to assemble more than one missile-ready nuclear device within about three months of deciding to do so). The Iranian regime, by its own statements and actions, has made itself Israel's most zealous foe; and the most crucial component of Israeli national-security doctrine, a tenet that dates back to the 1960s, when Israel developed its own nuclear capability as a response to the Jewish experience during the Holocaust, is that no regional adversary should be allowed to achieve nuclear parity with the reborn and still-besieged Jewish state.

In our conversation before his swearing-in, Netanyahu would not frame the issue in terms of nuclear parity—the Israeli policy of *amimut*, or opacity, prohibits acknowledging the existence of the country's nuclear arsenal, which consists of more than 100 weapons, mainly two-stage thermonuclear devices, capable of being delivered by missile, fighter-bomber, or submarine (two of which are said by intelligence sources to be currently positioned in the Persian Gulf). Instead, he framed the Iranian program as a threat not only to Israel but to all of Western civilization.

“You don't want a messianic apocalyptic cult controlling atomic bombs,” he said. “When the wide-eyed believer gets hold of the reins of power and the weapons of mass death, then the world should start worrying, and that's what is happening in Iran.” Israel, Netanyahu told me, is worried about an entire complex of problems, not only that Iran, or one of its proxies, would destroy Tel Aviv; like most Israeli leaders, he believes that if Iran gains possession of a nuclear weapon, it will use its new leverage to buttress its terrorist proxies in their attempts to make life difficult and dangerous; and he fears that Israel's status as a haven for Jews would be forever undermined, and with it, the entire *raison d'être* of the 100-year-old Zionist experiment.

IN OUR CONVERSATION, Netanyahu refused to discuss his timetable for action, or even whether he was considering military preemption of the Iranian nuclear program. But others familiar with his thinking helped me understand his worldview. Netanyahu's belief is that Iran is not Israel's problem alone; it is the world's problem, and the world, led by the United States, is duty-bound to grapple with it. But Netanyahu does not place great faith in sanctions—not the relatively weak sanctions against Iran recently passed by the

United Nations Security Council, nor the more rigorous ones being put in place by the U.S. and its European allies. Those close to him say that Netanyahu understands, however, that President Obama, with whom he has had a difficult and intermittently frigid—though lately thawing—relationship, believes that stringent sanctions, combined with various enticements to engage with the West, might still provide Iran with what one American administration official described to me as “a dignified off-ramp for Tehran to take.”

But, based on my conversations with Israeli decision-makers, this period of forbearance, in which Netanyahu waits to see if the West’s nonmilitary methods can stop Iran, will come to an end this December. Robert Gates, the American defense secretary, said in June at a meeting of NATO defense ministers that most intelligence estimates predict that Iran is one to three years away from building a nuclear weapon. “In Israel, we heard this as nine months from June—in other words, March of 2011,” one Israeli policy maker told me. “If we assume that nothing changes in these estimates, this means that we will have to begin thinking about our next step beginning at the turn of the year.”

The Netanyahu government is already intensifying its analytic efforts not just on Iran, but on a subject many Israelis have difficulty understanding: President Obama. The Israelis are struggling to answer what is for them the most pressing question: are there any circumstances under which President Obama would deploy force to stop Iran from going nuclear? Everything depends on the answer.

The Israelis argue that Iran demands the urgent attention of the entire international community, and in particular the United States, with its unparalleled ability to project military force. This is the position of many moderate Arab leaders as well. A few weeks ago, in uncommonly direct remarks, the ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to the United States, Yousef al-Otaiba, told me—in a public forum at the Aspen Ideas Festival—that his country would support a military strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities. He also said that if America allowed Iran to cross the nuclear threshold, the small Arab countries of the Gulf would have no choice but to leave the American orbit and ally themselves with Iran, out of self-protection. “There are many countries in the region who, if they lack the assurance the U.S. is willing to confront Iran, they will start running for cover towards Iran,” he said. “Small, rich, vulnerable countries in the region do not want to be the ones who stick their finger in the big bully’s eye, if nobody’s going to come to their support.”

Several Arab leaders have suggested that America’s standing in the Middle East depends on its willingness to confront Iran. They argue self-interestedly that an aerial attack on a handful of Iranian facilities would not be as complicated or as messy as, say, invading Iraq. “This is not a discussion about the invasion of Iran,” one Arab foreign minister told me. “We are hoping for the pinpoint striking of several dangerous facilities. America could do this very easily.”

The Israeli national-security adviser, Uzi Arad, once told me that the prime minister will sometimes, in the course of briefing foreign visitors on the importance of taking action

against Iran's nuclear program, say jokingly: "Let me tell you a secret. The American military is bigger than Israel's."

Barack Obama has said any number of times that he would find a nuclear Iran "unacceptable." His most stalwart comments on the subject have been discounted by some Israeli officials because they were made during his campaign for the presidency, while visiting Sderot, the town in southern Israel that had been the frequent target of rocket attacks by Hamas. "The world must prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon," he said. "I will take no options off the table in dealing with this potential Iranian threat. And understand part of my reasoning here. A nuclear Iran would be a game-changing situation, not just in the Middle East, but around the world. Whatever remains of our nuclear nonproliferation framework, I think, would begin to disintegrate. You would have countries in the Middle East who would see the potential need to also obtain nuclear weapons."

But the Israelis are doubtful that a man who positioned himself as the antithesis of George W. Bush, author of invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq, would launch a preemptive attack on a Muslim nation.

"We all watched his speech in Cairo," a senior Israeli official told me, referring to the June 2009 speech in which Obama attempted to reset relations with Muslims by stressing American cooperativeness and respect for Islam. "We don't believe that he is the sort of person who would launch a daring strike on Iran. We are afraid he would see a policy of containing a nuclear Iran rather than attacking it."

This official noted that even Bush balked at attacking Iran's nuclear facilities, and discouraged the Israelis from carrying out the attack on their own. (Bush would sometimes mock those aides and commentators who advocated an attack on Iran, even referring to the conservative columnists Charles Krauthammer and William Kristol as "the bomber boys," according to two people I spoke with who overheard this.) "Bush was two years ago, but the Iranian program was the same and the intent was the same," the Israeli official told me. "So I don't personally expect Obama to be more Bush than Bush."

If the Israelis reach the firm conclusion that Obama will not, under any circumstances, launch a strike on Iran, then the countdown will begin for a unilateral Israeli attack. "If the choice is between allowing Iran to go nuclear, or trying for ourselves what Obama won't try, then we probably have to try," the official told me.

Which brings us to a second question, one having to do with the nature of the man considering military action: would Netanyahu, a prime minister with an acute understanding of the essential role America plays in securing the existence of Israel (Netanyahu is a graduate of both Cheltenham High School, outside Philadelphia, and MIT, and is the most Americanized prime minister in Israel's history, more so even than the Milwaukee-raised Golda Meir), actually take a chance on permanently alienating American affection in order to make a high-risk attempt at stopping Iran? If Iran retaliates

against American troops in Iraq or Afghanistan, the consequences for Israel's relationship with America's military leadership could be catastrophic. (Of course, Netanyahu would be risking more than his relationship with the United States: a strike on Iran, Israeli intelligence officials believe, could provoke all-out retaliation by Iran's Lebanese subsidiary, Hezbollah, which now possesses, by most intelligence estimates, as many as 45,000 rockets—at least three times as many as it had in the summer of 2006, during the last round of fighting between the group and Israel.)

“The only reason Bibi [Netanyahu] would place Israel's relationship with America in total jeopardy is if he thinks that Iran represents a threat like the Shoah,” an Israeli official who spends considerable time with the prime minister told me. “In World War II, the Jews had no power to stop Hitler from annihilating us. Six million were slaughtered. Today, 6 million Jews live in Israel, and someone is threatening them with annihilation. But now we have the power to stop them. Bibi knows that this is the choice.” Numerous Israeli commentators and analysts have pointed out to me that Netanyahu is not unique in his understanding of this challenge; several of the prime ministers who preceded him cast Iran's threat in similarly existential terms. Still, Netanyahu is different. “He has a deep sense of his role in Jewish history,” Michael Oren, Israel's ambassador to the United States, told me.

To understand why Netanyahu possesses this deep sense—and why his understanding of Jewish history might lead him to attack Iran, even over Obama's objections—it is necessary to understand Ben-Zion Netanyahu, his 100-year-old father.

BEN-ZION NETANYAHU—his first name means “son of Zion”—is the world's foremost historian of the Spanish Inquisition and a onetime secretary to Vladimir Jabotinsky, the founder of the intractable, “revisionist” branch of Zionism. He is father to a tragic Israeli hero, Yonatan Netanyahu, who died while freeing the Jewish hostages at Entebbe in 1976; and also father to Benjamin, who strives for greatness in his father's eyes but has, on occasion, disappointed him, notably when he acquiesced, in his first term as prime minister in the late 1990s, to American pressure and withdrew Israeli forces from much of the West Bank city of Hebron, Judaism's second-holiest city. Benjamin Netanyahu is not known in most quarters for his pliability on matters concerning Palestinians, though he has been trying lately to meet at least some of Barack Obama's demands that he move the peace process forward.

“Always in the back of Bibi's mind is Ben-Zion,” one of the prime minister's friends told me. “He worries that his father will think he is weak.”

Ben-Zion Netanyahu's most important work, *The Origins of the Inquisition in 15th-Century Spain*, upended the scholarly consensus on the roots of that bleak chapter in Jewish history. He argued that Spanish hatred of Jews was spurred by the principle of *limpieza de sangre*, or the purity of blood; it was proto-Nazi thought, in other words, not mere theology, that motivated the Inquisition. Ben-Zion also argued that the Inquisition corresponds to the axiom that anti-Semitic persecution is preceded, in all cases, by carefully scripted and lengthy dehumanization campaigns meant to ensure the efficient

eventual elimination of Jews. To him, the lessons of Jewish history are plain and insistent.

Ben-Zion, by all accounts, was worshipped by his sons in their childhood, and today, the 60-year-old Benjamin, who has been known to act in charmless ways, conspicuously upholds the Fifth Commandment when discussing his father. At a party marking Ben-Zion's 100th birthday, held this past March at the Menachem Begin Heritage Center in Jerusalem, before an assembly that included the president of Israel, Shimon Peres, Benjamin credited his father with forecasting the Shoah and, in the early 1990s, predicting that "Muslim extremists would try to bring down the Twin Towers in New York." But he also told stories in a warmer and more personal vein, describing a loving father who, though a grim and forbidding figure to outsiders, enjoys cowboy movies and played soccer with his sons.

After a brief debate between Ben-Zion and another prominent academic about competing interpretations of the Inquisition—"It is an unusual 100th-birthday commemoration when a debate about the Inquisition breaks out," said Menachem Begin's son, Benny, who is a minister-without-portfolio in Netanyahu's cabinet—Ben-Zion rose to make valedictory remarks. His speech, unlike his son's, was succinct, devoid of sentiment, and strikingly unambiguous.

"Our party this evening compels me to speak of recent comments made about the continued existence of the nation of Israel and the new threats by its enemies depicting its upcoming destruction," Ben-Zion began. "From the Iranian side, we hear pledges that soon—in a matter of days, even—the Zionist movement will be put to an end and there will be no more Zionists in the world. One is supposed to conclude from this that the Jews of the Land of Israel will be annihilated, while the Jews of America, whose leaders refuse to pressure Iran, are being told in a hinted fashion that the annihilation of the Jews will not include them."

He went on, "The Jewish people are making their position clear and putting faith in their military power. The nation of Israel is showing the world today how a state should behave when it stands before an existential threat: by looking danger in the eye and calmly considering what should be done and what can be done. And to be ready to enter the fray at the moment there is a reasonable chance of success."

Many people in Likud Party circles have told me that those who discount Ben-Zion's influence on his son do so at their peril. "This was the father giving his son history's marching orders," one of the attendees told me. "I watched Bibi while his father spoke. He was completely absorbed." (One of Netanyahu's Knesset allies told me, indelicately, though perhaps not inaccurately, that the chance for movement toward the creation of an independent Palestinian state will come only after Ben-Zion's death. "Bibi could not withdraw from more of Judea and Samaria"—the biblical names for the West Bank—"and still look into his father's eyes.")

On Iran, Benjamin Netanyahu frames the crisis in nearly the same world-historical terms as his father. “Iran has threatened to annihilate a state,” Netanyahu told me. “In historical terms, this is an astounding thing. It’s a monumental outrage that goes effectively unchallenged in the court of public opinion. Sure, there are perfunctory condemnations, but there’s no *j’accuse*—there’s no shock.” He argued that a crucial lesson of history is that “bad things tend to get worse if they’re not challenged early.” He continued, “Iranian leaders talk about Israel’s destruction or disappearance while simultaneously creating weapons to ensure its disappearance.”

ONE OF THE MORE melancholic aspects of the confrontation between Iran and Israel is that Persian and Jewish civilizations have not forever been adversaries; one of the heroes of the Bible is the Persian king Cyrus, who restored the Jews to the land of Israel from their Babylonian captivity 2,500 years ago. (A few years after Harry Truman granted recognition to the reborn state of Israel in 1948, he declared, “I am Cyrus.”)

Iran is the home of an ancient Jewish community—Jews have lived there since the Babylonian exile, a millennium before Muhammad’s followers carried Islam to Persia. And in the modern era, Iran and Israel maintained close diplomatic ties before the overthrow of the shah in 1979; Israel’s support of the shah obviously angered his enemies, the newly empowered mullahs in Tehran, but this is insufficient to explain the depth of official Iranian hatred of Israel and Jews; something else must explain the sentiment expressed by Mohsen Rezai, the former commander of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps, who said in 1991—14 years before the rise of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian politician most associated in the West with the regime’s flamboyant anti-Semitism—“The day will come when, like Salman Rushdie, the Jews will not find a place to live anywhere in the world.”

The answer might be found in a line of Shia Muslim thinking that views Jews as ritually contaminated, a view derived in part from the Koran’s portrayal of Jews as treasonous foes of the Prophet Muhammad. As Robert Wistrich recounts in his new history of anti-Semitism, *A Lethal Obsession*, through the 17th and 18th centuries Shia clerics viewed Jews variously as “the leprosy of creation” and “the most unclean of the human race.” I once asked Ali Asghar Soltanieh, a leading Iranian diplomat who is now Iran’s ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency, why the leadership of Iran persistently described Israel not as a mere regional malefactor but as a kind of infectious disease. “Do you disagree?” he asked. “Do you not see that this is true?”

In a speech in June, Ahmadinejad, the Iranian president, explained Middle East history this way: “Sixty years ago, by means of an artificial and false pretext, and by fabricating information and inventing stories, they gathered the filthiest, most criminal people, who only appear to be human, from all corners of the world. They organized and armed them, and provided them with media and military backing. Thus, they occupied the Palestinian lands, and displaced the Palestinian people.” The “invented story” is, of course, the Holocaust. Ahmadinejad’s efforts to deny the historical truth of the Holocaust have the endorsement of high officialdom: the Iranian foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, said



in 2005, “The words of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on the Holocaust and on Israel are not personal opinion, nor isolated statements, but they express the view of the government.”

The Iranian leadership’s own view of nuclear dangers is perhaps best exemplified by a comment made in 2001 by the former Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, who entertained the idea that Israel’s demise could be brought about in a relatively pain-free manner for the Muslim world. “The use of an atomic bomb against Israel would destroy Israel completely while [a nuclear attack] against the Islamic countries would only cause damages,” Rafsanjani said.

It is this line of thinking, which suggests that rational deterrence theory, or the threat of mutual assured destruction, might not apply in the case of Iran, that has the Israeli government on a knife’s edge. And this is not a worry that is confined to Israel’s right. Even the left-wing Meretz Party, which is harsh in its condemnation of Netanyahu’s policies toward the Palestinians, considers Iran’s nuclear program to be an existential threat.

Israeli policy makers do not necessarily believe that Iran, should it acquire a nuclear device, would immediately launch it by missile at Tel Aviv. “On the one hand, they would like to see the Jews wiped out,” one Israeli defense official told me. “On the other hand, they know that Israel has unlimited reprisal capability”—this is an Israeli euphemism for the country’s second-strike nuclear arsenal—“and despite what Rafsanjani and others say, we think they know that they are putting Persian civilization at risk.”

The challenges posed by a nuclear Iran are more subtle than a direct attack, Netanyahu told me. “Several bad results would emanate from this single development. First, Iran’s militant proxies would be able to fire rockets and engage in other terror activities while enjoying a nuclear umbrella. This raises the stakes of any confrontation that they’d force on Israel. Instead of being a local event, however painful, it becomes a global one. Second, this development would embolden Islamic militants far and wide, on many continents, who would believe that this is a providential sign, that this fanaticism is on the ultimate road to triumph.

“You’d create a great sea change in the balance of power in our area,” he went on. An Iran with nuclear weapons would also attempt to persuade Arab countries to avoid making peace with Israel, and it would spark a regional nuclear-arms race. “The Middle East is incendiary enough, but with a nuclear-arms race, it will become a tinderbox,” he said.

Other Israeli leaders believe that the mere threat of a nuclear attack by Iran—combined with the chronic menacing of Israel’s cities by the rocket forces of Hamas and Hezbollah—will progressively undermine the country’s ability to retain its most creative and productive citizens. Ehud Barak, the defense minister, told me that this is his great fear for Israel’s future.

“The real threat to Zionism is the dilution of quality,” he said. “Jews know that they can land on their feet in any corner of the world. The real test for us is to make Israel such an attractive place, such a cutting-edge place in human society, education, culture, science, quality of life, that even American Jewish young people want to come here.” This vision is threatened by Iran and its proxies, Barak said. “Our young people can consciously decide to go other places,” if they dislike living under the threat of nuclear attack. “Our best youngsters could stay out of here by choice.”

Patriotism in Israel runs very high, according to numerous polls, and it seemed unlikely to me that mere fear of Iran could drive Israel’s Jews to seek shelter elsewhere. But one leading proponent of an Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities, Ephraim Sneh, a former general and former deputy defense minister, is convinced that if Iran crossed the nuclear threshold, the very idea of Israel would be endangered. “These people are good citizens, and brave citizens, but the dynamics of life are such that if someone has a scholarship for two years at an American university and the university offers him a third year, the parents will say, ‘Go ahead, remain there,’” Sneh told me when I met with him in his office outside of Tel Aviv not long ago. “If someone finishes a Ph.D. and they are offered a job in America, they might stay there. It will not be that people are running to the airport, but slowly, slowly, the decision-making on the family level will be in favor of staying abroad. The bottom line is that we would have an accelerated brain drain. And an Israel that is not based on entrepreneurship, that is not based on excellence, will not be the Israel of today.”

Most critically, Sneh said, if Israel is no longer understood by its 6 million Jewish citizens, and by the roughly 7 million Jews who live outside of Israel, to be a “natural safe haven,” then its *raison d’être* will have been subverted. He directed my attention to a framed photograph on his wall of three Israeli air force F-15s flying over Auschwitz, in Poland. The Israelis had been invited in 2003 by the Polish air force to make this highly symbolic flight. The photograph was not new to me; I had seen it before on a dozen office walls in the Israeli Defense Ministry in Tel Aviv. “You see those planes?” Sneh asked me. “That’s the picture I look at all the time. When someone says that they will wipe out the Jews, we have to deny him the tools. The problem with the photograph is that we were too late.”

To understand why Israelis of different political dispositions see Iran as quite possibly the most crucial challenge they have faced in their 62-year history, one must keep in mind the near-sanctity, in the public’s mind, of Israel’s nuclear monopoly. The Israeli national narrative, in shorthand, begins with *shoah*, which is Hebrew for “calamity,” and ends with *tkumah*, “rebirth.” Israel’s nuclear arsenal symbolizes national rebirth, and something else as well: that Jews emerged from World War II having learned at least one lesson, about the price of powerlessness.

In his new book, *The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel’s Bargain With the Bomb*, Avner Cohen, the preeminent historian of Israel’s nuclear program, writes that David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, was nearly obsessed with developing nuclear weapons as the only guarantor against further slaughter. “What Einstein, Oppenheimer, and Teller, the

three of them are Jews, made for the United States, could also be done by scientists in Israel, for their own people,” Ben-Gurion declared. Cohen argues that the umbrella created by Israel’s nuclear monopoly has allowed the Jewish state to recover from the wounds of the Holocaust.

But those wounds do not heal, Sneh says. “The Shoah is not some sort of psychological complex. It is an historic lesson. My grandmother and my grandfather were from Poland. My father fought for the Polish army as an officer and escaped in 1940. My grandparents stayed, and they were killed by the Polish farmer who was supposed to give them shelter, for a lot of money. That’s why I don’t trust the goyim. One time is enough. I don’t put my life in the hands of goyim.”

ONE MONDAY EVENING in early summer, I sat in the office of the decidedly non-*goyische* Rahm Emanuel, the White House chief of staff, and listened to several National Security Council officials he had gathered at his conference table explain—in so many words—why the Jewish state should trust the non-Jewish president of the United States to stop Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold.

“The expression ‘All options are on the table’ means that all options are on the table,” Emanuel told me before the meeting, in a tone meant to suggest both resolve and irritation at those who believe the president lacks such resolve. The group interview he had arranged was a kind of rolling seminar on the challenges Iran poses; half a dozen officials made variations of the same argument: that President Obama spends more time talking with foreign leaders on Iran than on any other subject.

One of those at the table, Ben Rhodes, a deputy national-security adviser who served as the lead author of the recent “National Security Strategy for the United States” as well as of the president’s conciliatory Cairo speech, suggested that Iran’s nuclear program was a clear threat to American security, and that the Obama administration responds to national-security threats in the manner of other administrations. “We are coordinating a multifaceted strategy to increase pressure on Iran, but that doesn’t mean we’ve removed any option from the table,” Rhodes said. “This president has shown again and again that when he believes it is necessary to use force to protect American national-security interests, he has done so. We’re not going to address hypotheticals about when and if we would use military force, but I think we’ve made it clear that we aren’t removing the option of force from any situation in which our national security is affected.”

There was an intermittently prickly quality to this meeting, and not only because it was hosted by Emanuel, whose default state is exasperation. For more than a year, these White House officials have parried the charge that their president is unwilling to face the potential consequences of a nuclear Iran, and they are frustrated by what they believe to be a caricature of his position. (A former Bush administration official told me that his president faced the opposite problem: Bush, bogged down by two wars and believing that Iran wasn’t that close to crossing the nuclear threshold, opposed the use of force against Iran’s program, and made his view clear, “but no one believed him.”)

At one point, I put forward the idea that for abundantly obvious reasons, few people would believe Barack Obama would open up a third front in the greater Middle East. One of the officials responded heatedly, “What have we done that would allow you to reach the conclusion that we think that a nuclear Iran would represent a tolerable situation?” It is undeniably true, however, that the administration has appeared on occasion less than stalwart on the issue. The French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, has criticized Obama as a purveyor of baseless hope. At the UN Security Council last September, Sarkozy said, “I support the extended hand of the Americans, but what good have proposals for dialogue brought the international community? More uranium enrichment and declarations by the leaders of Iran to wipe a UN member state off the map,” he said, referring to Israel.

Obama administration officials, particularly in the Pentagon, have several times signaled unhappiness at the possibility of military preemption. In April, the undersecretary of defense for policy, Michele Flournoy, told reporters that military force against Iran was “off the table in the near term.” She later backtracked, but Admiral Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has also criticized the idea of attacking Iran. “Iran getting a nuclear weapon would be incredibly destabilizing. Attacking them would also create the same kind of outcome,” he said in April. “In an area that’s so unstable right now, we just don’t need more of that.”

The gathering in Emanuel’s office was meant to communicate a number of clear messages to me, including one that was more militant than that delivered by Admiral Mullen: President Obama has by no means ruled out counterproliferation by force. The meeting was also meant to communicate that Obama’s outreach to the Iranians was motivated not by naïveté, but by a desire to test Tehran’s intentions in a deliberate fashion; that the president understands that an Iranian bomb would spur a regional arms race that could destroy his antiproliferation program; and that American and Israeli assessments of Iran’s nuclear program are synchronized in ways they were not before. One official at the table, Gary Samore, the National Security Council official who oversees the administration’s counterproliferation agenda, told me that the Israelis agree with American assessments that Iran’s uranium-enrichment program is plagued with problems.

“The most essential measure of nuclear-weapons capability is how quickly they can build weapons-grade material, and from that standpoint we can measure, based on the IAEA reports, that the Iranians are not doing well,” Samore said. “The particular centrifuge machines they’re running are based on an inferior technology. They are running into some technical difficulties, partly because of the work we’ve done to deny them access to foreign components. When they make the parts themselves, they are making parts that don’t have quality control.” (When I mentioned this comment to a senior Israeli official, he said, “We agree with this American assessment, but we also agree with Secretary Gates that Iran is one year away from crossing the nuclear threshold.”)

Dennis Ross, the former Middle East peace negotiator who is currently a senior National Security Council official, said during the meeting that he believes the Israelis now understand that American-instigated measures have slowed Iran’s progress, and that the

administration is working to convince the Israelis—and other parties in the region—that the sanctions strategy “has a chance of working.”

“The president has said he hasn’t taken any options off the table, but let’s take a look at why we think this strategy could work,” he said. “We have interesting data points over the past year, about Iran trying to deflect pressure when they thought that pressure was coming, which suggests that their ability to calculate costs and benefits is quite real. Last June, when they hadn’t responded to our bilateral outreach, the president said that we would take stock by September. Two weeks before the G-20—a meeting of the leaders of the world’s 20 largest economies—the Iranians said they would talk, after having resisted talking until that point. They didn’t do it because suddenly they saw the light; they did it because pressure was coming. They’re able to think about what matters to them.”

Ross went on to argue that the sanctions Iran now faces may affect the regime’s thinking. “The sanctions are going to cut across the board. They are taking place in the context of Iranian mismanagement—the Iranians are going to have to cut [food and fuel] subsidies; they already have public alienation; they have division in the elites, and between the elites and the rest of the country. They are looking at the costs of trying to maintain control over a disaffected public. They wanted to head off sanctions because they knew that sanctions would be a problem. There is real potential here to affect their calculus. We’re pursuing a path right now that has some potential. It doesn’t mean you don’t think about everything else, but we’re on a path.”

One question no administration official seems eager to answer is this: what will the United States do if sanctions fail? Several Arab officials complained to me that the Obama administration has not communicated its intentions to them, even generally. No Arab officials I spoke with appeared to believe that the administration understands the regional ambitions of their Persian adversary. One Arab foreign minister told me that he believes Iran is taking advantage of Obama’s “reasonableness.”

“Obama’s voters like it when the administration shows that it doesn’t want to fight Iran, but this is not a domestic political issue,” the foreign minister said. “Iran will continue on this reckless path, unless the administration starts to speak unreasonably. The best way to avoid striking Iran is to make Iran think that the U.S. is about to strike Iran. We have to know the president’s intentions on this matter. We are his allies.” (According to two administration sources, this issue caused tension between President Obama and his recently dismissed director of national intelligence, Admiral Dennis Blair. According to these sources, Blair, who was said to put great emphasis on the Iranian threat, told the president that America’s Arab allies needed more reassurance. Obama reportedly did not appreciate the advice.)

In Israel, of course, officials expend enormous amounts of energy to understand President Obama, despite the assurances they have received from Emanuel, Ross, and others. Delegations from Netanyahu’s bureau, from the defense and foreign ministries, and from the Israeli intelligence community have been arriving in Washington lately with great

regularity. “We pack our thermometers and go to Washington and take everyone’s temperature,” one Israeli official told me.

The increased tempo of these visits is only one sign of deepening contacts between Israel and America, as Iran moves closer to nuclear breakout: the chief of staff of the Israeli army, Lieutenant General Gabi Ashkenazi, is said to speak now with his American counterpart, Admiral Mullen, regularly. Mullen recently made a stop in Israel that had one main purpose, according to an Israeli source: “to make sure we didn’t do anything in Iran before they thought we might do something in Iran.”

Not long ago, the chief of Israeli military intelligence, Major General Amos Yadlin, paid a secret visit to Chicago to meet with Lester Crown, the billionaire whose family owns a significant portion of General Dynamics, the military contractor. Crown is one of Israel’s most prominent backers in the American Jewish community, and was one of Barack Obama’s earliest and most steadfast supporters. According to sources in America and Israel, General Yadlin asked Crown to communicate Israel’s existential worries directly to President Obama. When I reached Crown by phone, he confirmed that he had met with Yadlin, but denied that the general traveled to Chicago to deliver this message. “Maybe he has a cousin in Chicago or something,” Crown said. But he did say that Yadlin discussed with him the “Iranian clock”—the time remaining before Iran reached nuclear capability—and that he agreed with Yadlin that the United States must stop Iran before it goes nuclear. “I share with the Israelis the feeling that we certainly have the military capability and that we have to have the will to use it. The rise of Iran is not in the best interest of the U.S.

“I support the president,” Crown said. “But I wish [administration officials] were a little more outgoing in the way they have talked. I would feel more comfortable if I knew that they had the will to use military force, as a last resort. You cannot threaten someone as a bluff. There has to be a will to do it.”

On my last visit to Israel, I was asked almost a dozen times by senior officials and retired generals if I could explain Barack Obama and his feelings about Israel. Several officials even asked if I considered Obama to be an anti-Semite. I answered this question by quoting Abner Mikva, the former congressman, federal judge, and mentor to Obama, who famously said in 2008, “I think when this is all over, people are going to say that Barack Obama is the first Jewish president.” I explained that Obama has been saturated with the work of Jewish writers, legal scholars, and thinkers, and that a large number of his friends, supporters, and aides are Jewish. But philo-Semitism does not necessarily equal sympathy for Netanyahu’s Likud Party—certainly not among American Jews, who are, like the president they voted for in overwhelming numbers, generally supportive of a two-state solution, and dubious about Jewish settlement of the West Bank.

When I made these points to one senior Israeli official, he said: “This is the problem. If he is a J Street Jew, we are in trouble.” J Street is the liberal pro-Israel organization established to counter the influence of AIPAC and other groups. “We’re worried that he

thinks like the liberal American Jews who say, ‘If we remove some settlements, then the extremist problem and the Iran problem go away.’”

Rahm Emanuel suggested that the administration is trying to thread a needle: providing “unshakeable” support for Israel; protecting it from the consequences of an Iranian nuclear bomb; but pushing it toward compromise with the Palestinians. Emanuel, in our meeting, disputed that Israel is incapable of moving forward on the peace process so long as Iran looms as an existential threat. And he drafted the past six Israeli prime ministers — including Netanyahu, who during his first term in the late 1990s, to his father’s chagrin, compromised with the Palestinians—to buttress his case. “Rabin, Peres, Netanyahu, Barak, Sharon, Olmert—every one of them pursued some form of a negotiated settlement, which would have been in Israel’s own strategic interest,” he said. “There have been plenty of other threats while successive Israeli governments have pursued a peace process. There is no doubt that Iran is a major threat, but they didn’t just flip the switch on [the nuclear program] a year ago.”

Emanuel had one more message to deliver: for the most practical of reasons, Israel should consider carefully whether a military strike would be worth the trouble it would unleash. “I’m not sure that given the time line, whatever the time line is, that whatever they did, they wouldn’t stop” the nuclear program, he said. “They would be postponing.” It was then that I realized that, on some subjects, the Israelis and Americans are still talking past each other. The Americans consider a temporary postponement of Iran’s nuclear program to be of dubious value. The Israelis don’t. “When Menachem Begin bombed Osirak [in Iraq], he had been told that his actions would set back the Iraqis one year,” one cabinet minister told me. “He did it anyway.”

IN MY CONVERSATIONS with former Israeli air-force generals and strategists, the prevalent tone was cautious. Many people I interviewed were ready, on condition of anonymity, to say why an attack on Iran’s nuclear sites would be difficult for Israel. And some Israeli generals, like their American colleagues, questioned the very idea of an attack. “Our time would be better spent lobbying Barack Obama to do this, rather than trying this ourselves,” one general told me. “We are very good at this kind of operation, but it is a big stretch for us. The Americans can do this with a minimum of difficulty, by comparison. This is too big for us.”

Successive Israeli prime ministers have ordered their military tacticians to draw up plans for a strike on Iran, and the Israeli air force has, of course, complied. It is impossible to know for sure how the Israelis might carry out such an operation, but knowledgeable officials in both Washington and Tel Aviv shared certain assumptions with me.

The first is that Israel would get only one try. Israeli planes would fly low over Saudi Arabia, bomb their targets in Iran, and return to Israel by flying again over Saudi territory, possibly even landing in the Saudi desert for refueling—perhaps, if speculation rife in intelligence circles is to be believed, with secret Saudi cooperation. These planes would have to return home quickly, in part because Israeli intelligence believes that Iran

would immediately order Hezbollah to fire rockets at Israeli cities, and Israeli air-force resources would be needed to hunt Hezbollah rocket teams.

When I visited Major General Gadi Eisenkot, the general in charge of Israel's Northern Command, at his headquarters near the Lebanese border, he told me that in the event of a unilateral Israeli strike on Iran, his mission would be to combat Hezbollah rocket forces. Eisenkot said that the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, which began when Hezbollah fighters crossed the border and attacked an Israeli patrol, was seen by the group's Iranian sponsors as a strategic mistake. "The Iranians got angry at Hezbollah for jumping ahead like that," Eisenkot said. American and Israeli intelligence officials agree that the Iranians are now hoping to keep Hezbollah in reserve until Iran can cross the nuclear threshold.

Eisenkot contended that the 2006 war was a setback for Hezbollah. "Hezbollah suffered a lot during this war," he said. Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, "lost a lot of his men. He knows he made a mistake. That is one reason we have had four years of quiet. What has changed in four years is that Hezbollah has increased its missile capability, but we have increased our capabilities as well." He concluded by saying, in reference to a potential Israeli strike on Iran, "Our readiness means that Israel has freedom of action."

Even if Israel's Northern Command successfully combated Hezbollah rocket attacks in the wake of an Israeli strike, political limitations would not allow Israel to make repeated sorties over Iran. "The Saudis can let us go once," one general told me. "They'll turn their radar off when we're on our way to Iran, and we'll come back fast. Our problem is not Iranian air defenses, because we have ways of neutralizing that. Our problem is that the Saudis will look very guilty in the eyes of the world if we keep flying over their territory."

America, too, would look complicit in an Israeli attack, even if it had not been forewarned. The assumption—often, but not always, correct—that Israel acts only with the approval of the United States is a feature of life in the Middle East, and it is one the Israelis say they are taking into account. I spoke with several Israeli officials who are grappling with this question, among others: what if American intelligence learns about Israeli intentions hours before the scheduled launch of an attack? "It is a nightmare for us," one of these officials told me. "What if President Obama calls up Bibi and says, 'We know what you're doing. Stop immediately.' Do we stop? We might have to. A decision has been made that we can't lie to the Americans about our plans. We don't want to inform them beforehand. This is for their sake and for ours. So what do we do? These are the hard questions." (Two officials suggested that Israel may go on pre-attack alert a number of times before actually striking: "After the fifth or sixth time, maybe no one would believe that we're really going," one official said.)

Another question Israeli planners struggle with: how will they know if their attacks have actually destroyed a significant number of centrifuges and other hard-to-replace parts of the clandestine Iranian program? Two strategists told me that Israel will have to dispatch



commandos to finish the job, if necessary, and bring back proof of the destruction. The commandos—who, according to intelligence sources, may be launched from the autonomous Kurdish territory in northern Iraq—would be facing a treacherous challenge, but one military planner I spoke with said the army would have no choice but to send them.

“It is very important to be able to tell the Israeli people what we have achieved,” he said. “Many Israelis think the Iranians are building Auschwitz. We have to let them know that we have destroyed Auschwitz, or we have to let them know that we tried and failed.” There are, of course, Israeli leaders who believe that attacking Iran is too risky. Gabi Ashkenazi, the Israeli army chief of staff, is said by numerous sources to doubt the usefulness of an attack, and other generals I spoke with worry that talk of an “existential threat” is itself a kind of existential threat to the Zionist project, which was meant to preclude such threats against the Jewish people. “We don’t want politicians to put us in a bad position because of the word *Shoah*,” one general said. “We don’t want our neighbors to think that we are helpless against an Iran with a nuclear bomb, because Iran might have the bomb one day. There is no guarantee that Israel will do this, or that America will do this.”

After staring at the photograph of the Israeli air-force flyover of Auschwitz more than a dozen different times in more than a dozen different offices, I came to see the contradiction at its core. If the Jewish physicists who created Israel’s nuclear arsenal could somehow have ripped a hole in the space-time continuum and sent a squadron of fighters back to 1942, then the problem of Auschwitz would have been solved in 1942. In other words, the creation of a serious Jewish military capability—a nuclear bomb, say, or the Israeli air force—during World War II would have meant a quicker end to the Holocaust. It is fair to say, then, that the existence of the Israeli air force, and of Israel’s nuclear arsenal, means axiomatically that the Iranian nuclear program is not the equivalent of Auschwitz.

I put this formula to Ephraim Sneh, the former general and staunch advocate of an Israeli attack. “We have created a strategic balance in our favor,” he said, “but Iran may launch a ballistic missile with a nuclear bomb, and this F-15 in the picture cannot prevent that.” This is a devilish problem. And devilish problems have sometimes caused Israel to overreach.

Benjamin Netanyahu feels, for reasons of national security, that if sanctions fail, he will be forced to take action. But an Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities, successful or not, may cause Iran to redouble its efforts—this time with a measure of international sympathy—to create a nuclear arsenal. And it could cause chaos for America in the Middle East. One of the few people I spoke with in Israel who seemed to be at least somewhat phlegmatic about Iran’s nuclear threat was the country’s president, Shimon Peres, the last member of Israel’s founding generation still in government. Peres sees the Iranian nuclear program as potentially catastrophic, to be sure. But he advocates the imposition of “moral sanctions” followed by economic sanctions, and then the creation of “an envelope around Iran of anti-missile systems so the missiles of Iran will not be able

to fly.” When I asked if he believed in a military option, he said, “Why should I declare something like that?” He indicated he was uncomfortable with the idea of unilateral Israeli action and suggested that Israel can afford to recognize its limitations, because he believes, unlike many Israelis, that President Obama will, one way or another, counter the threat of Iran, not on behalf of Israel (though he said he believes Obama would come to Israel’s defense if necessary), but because he understands that on the challenge of Iran, the interests of America and Israel (and the West, and Western-allied Arab states) naturally align.

Based on months of interviews, I have come to believe that the administration knows it is a near-certainty that Israel will act against Iran soon if nothing or no one else stops the nuclear program; and Obama knows—as his aides, and others in the State and Defense departments made clear to me—that a nuclear-armed Iran is a serious threat to the interests of the United States, which include his dream of a world without nuclear weapons. Earlier this year, I agreed with those, including many Israelis, Arabs—and Iranians—who believe there is no chance that Obama would ever resort to force to stop Iran; I still don’t believe there is a great chance he will take military action in the near future—for one thing, the Pentagon is notably unenthusiastic about the idea. But Obama is clearly seized by the issue. And understanding that perhaps the best way to obviate a military strike on Iran is to make the threat of a strike by the Americans seem real, the Obama administration seems to be purposefully raising the stakes. A few weeks ago, Denis McDonough, the chief of staff of the National Security Council, told me, “What you see in Iran is the intersection of a number of leading priorities of the president, who sees a serious threat to the global nonproliferation regime, a threat of cascading nuclear activities in a volatile region, and a threat to a close friend of the United States, Israel. I think you see the several streams coming together, which accounts for why it is so important to us.”

When I asked Peres what he thought of Netanyahu’s effort to make Israel’s case to the Obama administration, he responded, characteristically, with a parable, one that suggested his country should know its place, and that it was up to the American president, and only the American president, to decide in the end how best to safeguard the future of the West. The story was about his mentor, David Ben-Gurion.

“Shortly after John F. Kennedy was elected president, Ben-Gurion met him at the Waldorf-Astoria” in New York, Peres told me. “After the meeting, Kennedy accompanied Ben-Gurion to the elevator and said, ‘Mr. Prime Minister, I want to tell you, I was elected because of your people, so what can I do for you in return?’ Ben-Gurion was insulted by the question. He said, ‘What you can do is be a great president of the United States. You must understand that to have a great president of the United States is a great event.’”

Peres went on to explain what he saw as Israel’s true interest. “We don’t want to win over the president,” he said. “We want the president to win.”