



Bar-Ilan University

Besa Memorandum  
No. 5



THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER  
FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

## **An Integrated Imperative: Attack Iran and Launch a Regional Peace Initiative**

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Yehezkel Dror

## An Integrated Imperative: Attack Iran and Launch a Regional Peace Initiative

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Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan 52900 Israel  
<http://www.besacenter.org>  
ISSN 0793-1042  
May 2012

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**An Integrated Imperative: Attack Iran and Launch a Regional  
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## **An Integrated Imperative: Attack Iran and Launch a Regional Peace Initiative**

*Yehezkel Dror*

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The possession of nuclear weapons by Iran poses serious dangers to Israel because of the real possibility that the rulers of Iran may use them, directly or indirectly, against Israel. There also exists the likelihood that Iranian nuclear weapons will cause nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, further increasing the danger.

Hopefully, international sanctions will prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons or the US will launch a preemptive attack if necessary. But Israel cannot leave the future of its national security to the uncertain decision making of others. If Iranian advances towards construction of a nuclear weapon are not halted, Israel will have no choice but to attack Iranian nuclear and military facilities while they are still vulnerable.

In such a case, a violent reaction by Iran is to be expected, but the impact of Iranian retaliation should not be exaggerated. Even pessimistic assumptions about the scope of Iranian retaliation make it clear that the expected damage to Israel will be less, by many orders of magnitude, than the destructive potential of an Iranian nuclear attack on Israel. Other potential consequences of an Israeli strike include harm to Israel's relations with the US and other powers as well as the aggravation of parts of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The most serious possible outcome, however, is that Iran will reestablish its nuclear activities, with determination to take revenge on Israel.

To mitigate these potentially negative outcomes, and to bring about measures that will prevent the renewal of Iran's nuclear efforts, Israel must combine an attack with an initiative to advance a comprehensive Middle East peace agreement, relying in part on the Arab-Islamic Peace Initiative. Integrating an attack with a broad, multi-

dimensional, credible peace initiative will multiply the benefits of both, whether or not there is an immediate favorable response from Arab states.

The recommendation to attack, if there is no other way to deny Iran of nuclear weapons, is not necessarily conditional on presenting an Israeli peace initiative. But the attack recommendation is less problematic and more valid if it is integrated with such an initiative. The crisis that would be caused by a preemptive Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities is likely, paradoxically, to provide an appropriate opportunity for the peace initiative, both in the Middle East and in Israeli domestic politics. Thus, this dual-track recommendation also meets the parameter of feasibility.

## **An Integrated Imperative: Attack Iran and Launch a Regional Peace Initiative**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper examines the option of an Israeli attack on the Iranian nuclear facilities. It is based on two working assumptions. The first is that Iran is making a maximal effort to achieve military nuclear capacities, either by producing nuclear weapons or becoming a “break out” state ready to produce nuclear weapons shortly after deciding to do so. In view of all the published information, this is a very strong assumption and obliges Israel to act as if this is the intention of Iran, unless proven otherwise.

The second working assumption is that Israel has the ability to execute an attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities that will delay the acquisition of nuclear weapons for at least three to four years and perhaps more – with a very high probability of success and a very low probability of dismal failure. Doing so will also provide opportunities to prevent Iran from renewing its nuclear weapons efforts. This working assumption has a limited time frame, as Israel must attack before Iran has had time to harden, disperse, and otherwise protect its critical nuclear facilities, immunizing them against substantial damage by the Israeli attack instruments (which probably are lesser than those of the US). This period of vulnerability is rapidly eroding. Public information does not enable a reliable estimate of its length, and it is very doubtful if intelligence agencies can provide a concrete “attack by” date since Iranian vulnerability is also relative to the type of attack. In any case, the time available for a successful Israeli attack is relatively short.

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The latter working assumption is based on an overall evaluation of the capability of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and on the certainty that in the absence of such an ability Israel would refrain from attacking. Discussions of this matter in the mass media, including by various experts and think tanks, are not credible. They lack information on Israel's operational attack plans and on Iran's nuclear facilities and their vulnerabilities. Opinions expressed by former senior defense officials too should be regarded with much doubt; not all evaluations presented in public by people in senior positions are necessarily convincing.

The priority tasks for Israel's national security apparatus include reducing as far as possible any dangers to Israel and its inhabitants (and also, where necessary, to increase the security of Jews worldwide in close cooperation with foreign authorities). It is not difficult to sketch a set of general threat scenarios for Israel (and also opportunity scenarios, the utilization of which is an important part of high quality national security policy). These include, for instance, renewed clashes on the eastern front, war in the north, confrontations with Egypt, rocket and missile attacks, a new type of Intifada, mega-terror, large scale cyber-attacks, innovative forms of passive resistance, non-violent mass aggression, and so on. However, this paper will deal with the most ominous danger in the foreseeable future – namely, an extremely anti-Israel Iran that is in possession of nuclear weapons.

### **FACING A SERIOUS FUTURE DANGER**

The main dilemma in facing any future danger is between implementing preventive action or waiting until the danger becomes realized or nearly so. It is necessary to weigh the likelihood of the realization of the danger in the near or far future and the damage it will cause against the costs of immediate preventive action. If the realization likelihood is low or is in the distant future, thus making it very uncertain, and there is no significant difference between the expected damage if it occurs in the future and the cost of current preventive action, then waiting is the preferable option. However if the realization likelihood in the foreseeable future is high and the

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expected damage is significantly larger than the cost of present action, then the preferable option is to engage in the preventive initiative.

A third situation arises when the likelihood of realizing the future danger is small or very small, or – and this is very different – unknowable, but the damage that it will cause is by several orders of magnitude greater than the cost of preventive action. An example of such a case is the initiation of war under favorable conditions at present in order to prevent a much harder war, which is likely to break out in the foreseeable future. This is clearly the choice facing Israel in respect to its decision of whether or not to attack Iran's nuclear facilities.

The issue is one of coping with “thick” uncertainty, as outcomes cannot be predicted reliably in terms of probabilities, the shape of some results cannot be foreseen, and unconceivable consequences cannot be excluded.

A sometimes expressed view is that initiating a preventive war is morally wrong, all the more so when one cannot be sure that without it a harsh war is sure to occur in the future. However, this view, though honorable, is primitive and should be rejected. It lacks understanding of the nature of policy as a tool that, by nature, must deal with the future, which is never certain; and it does not give any weight to the important value of preventing pain in the future. Furthermore, such a view clings to what is “certain,” ignoring what “may come” even when very likely or very significant, thus further negating every effort to influence the future, which is always contingent and uncertain.

Many who oppose, for moral reasons, Israeli military action against the Iranian nuclear facilities, preferring to avoid the certainty of present casualties over the possibility of many more future casualties, are enthusiastic supporters of accepting present security risks for the sake of possibly achieving peace, however uncertain. This is no cause for surprise, as human beings are inconsistent in their evaluations of time and risk dimensions. But responsible policy making is morally and practically obliged to avoid such thinking fallacies and biases, all

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the more so when many human lives and the fate of a nation are at stake.

Accordingly, the recommended guiding principle is to prevent future dangers, even at present costs, on the condition that on one hand the future danger is serious, having a substantive likelihood of occurring and causing much damage, and on the other hand the danger can, with high likelihood, be significantly reduced at a much lower cost by taking action now.

It must be clear, however, that this is a “fuzzy gamble,” though not a “wild” one. The outcomes of both options – to initiate military action now or to postpone it – can be foreseen as not more than plausible conjectures and often only as guesstimates, leaving much irreducible thick uncertainty. The necessity to “gamble” for high stakes, sometimes up to the fate of a nation, is tragic. But to not gamble, that is not to act, is often the worst gamble of all. In a world full of contingencies and uncertainties there is no escape from the essential nature of policy choices as fuzzy gambles. It is the duty of heads of governments to stand up to the moral and psychological pressures stemming from this nature of decisions and to make decisive choices that are as good fuzzy gambles as can be made after deep and responsible pondering. But it is doubtful whether this can be explained to the Israeli public at large, or to citizens of other countries, before education is radically reformed.

Indeed, senior decision makers, their advisors, and all main opinion shapers must be fully aware of the true nature of choice in the face of thick uncertainty, including all significant choices, being in essence fuzzy gambles, sometimes for very high stakes. This fully applies to the challenge posed to Israel by the Iranian nuclear efforts.

### **DUTY OF ELECTED LEADERS**

When a state faces choices critical to shaping its future, difficult issues of democratic decision making arise. Some believe that political leaders should be tuned in to the views of the public and give much weight to public opinion as expressed in polls, surveys, mass demonstrations, and so on. This view, however, is confronted by a

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number of practical concerns and alternative opinions about the principles of democracy. Practical concerns include doubts about the validity of public opinion polls and surveys and about the stability of public attitudes, which can change from one extreme to another – for instance following a successful or failing military operation. In addition, often the public lacks the knowledge essential to adopting an at least half-evidence-based position.

The Iranian issue depends mainly on security considerations and professional military and statecraft evaluations which are necessarily limited to very few persons. Therefore, public opinion on whether to attack Iran's nuclear facilities unavoidably lacks information which would be essential to forming a well-grounded view. The inescapable conclusion is that no weight should be given to public opinion in governmental decisions on this issue even when the views of the public are reliably known and stable – which is not the case.

Even more important are the principles of representative democracy, which impose full responsibility for decisions on legitimate heads of government and authorize them to make choices. Therefore, on the issue of military action against Iran's nuclear facilities, the principles of democracy do not require taking into account public opinion, surely not in the form of polls and demonstrations. Furthermore, it is the duty of decision makers to accept political risks, if necessary, in order to make correct choices on such critical issues, though they do not actually have to do so in this case, as they can easily mobilize public support for their decisions unless and until possible negative results become glaringly visible.

Putting the proposed principle into context, it must be added that the situation is different with respect to the peace process, which is largely a matter of values in which classified information is not critical, relevant considerations extend over a long period of time, and the implementation of any agreement requires broad public support.

### **DANGERS POSED BY A NUCLEAR IRAN**

An incorrect approach to analyzing the dangers stemming from a nuclear Iran is to approach the issue with various assumptions on the

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degree to which Iran is “rational” or not. Strictly speaking, the concept of “rationality” deals with the selection of effective options for achieving given values and goals, as well as the logical validity of drawing conclusions from different premises. But the concept does not deal with the “reasonableness” of values and goals, which is derived from world views, culture, personal faith, and individual choices. Thus, for instance, a terror group whose values include the mass killing of non-believers can be very rational in selecting its method of action. Thus, the indiscriminate use of the term “rationality” to describe overall wisdom or smartness, or reasonableness, misses the mark in trying to understand Iran.

Clearly the values and goals of Iran, possibly including its risk appetite or aversion, deviate from those accepted as “reasonable” in Western culture. However, given those values and goals, Iran seems to generally behave with great “instrumental rationality.” It is also likely that the extreme beliefs of its leaders do, to some extent, corrupt their perception of reality and selection of options –this is sure to happen even more so in times of stress.

Furthermore decision making is necessarily influenced, not always negatively, by intuition, feelings and other processes of the mind. It is also shaped by culture, institutions, personal idiosyncrasies, calculations of senior decision makers, and other factors. All this leads to the conclusion that viewing Iran as “rational,” or “crazy,” or in terms of other simplistic notions, is superficial and misleading. Instead, a complex understanding of the mindset and decision processes of its leaders is required. And, if this is impossible, then lesser levels of understanding must be supplemented by uncertainty-coping decision principles.

Ideally, it is desirable to build dynamic probabilistic models of the decision processes of Iran's rulers based on the above categories, including psychological profiles. But, despite some attempts, the necessary theoretical and empirical knowledge does not exist. Considering the difficulty in trying to foresee the decisions of Israeli governments, and also to explain them after the fact, even with access

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to all relevant material and good familiarity both with the decision makers and with the political-security culture of Israel, one realizes that there is no possibility to predict future Iranian choices in this way. There is no choice then but to develop as reliable as possible an overall evaluation – a type of “Gestalt” perception – together with a detailed examination of components on which information is available, while maintaining a good measure of doubt on the conclusions of such efforts. This is the process on which this paper is based.

In addition, given the potentially very serious danger that Iranian nuclear weapons pose to Israel, an Israeli decision principle of acting according to a substantive but measured dose of pessimism must be adopted. This implies that in the case of irreducible uncertainty, the working assumption of Israel should be that Iran may take extreme action against Israel despite all the involved risks to Iran. Still, this is not enough to prove that the danger is so serious as to justify military action against the Iranian nuclear facilities and all that this entails. Therefore, the main dangers posed by Iranian nuclear weapons to Israel need specification.

It is unlikely that Iran regards Israel as its main enemy and that it is developing nuclear weapons primarily against Israel. Various factors could serve as reasons for the development of nuclear weapons – the history of the Sunni-Shiite conflict, the Iraq-Iran War, the imperial tradition of Iran, etc. – even if Israel did not exist.

Also, Iran's rulers are surely aware that a nuclear attack on Israel would be followed by a lethal Israeli counter strike and perhaps also by serious counter measures by additional countries, headed by the United States. But this does not negate the possibility that Iran will attack Israel with nuclear weapons, this being all the more likely as pronouncements by its leaders demonstrate deep hostility towards Israel and a will to terminate its existence.

For instance, facing a domestic revolution, the endangered rulers of Iran may attack Israel with nuclear weapons under their direct control with the intention to “let me perish with the Zionist enemy.” Without claiming that the two cases are similar, one should recall that during

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the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, Cuba's ruler proposed to the ruler of the USSR the start of an apocalyptic nuclear war, knowing full well that Cuba would be totally destroyed. Also possible are nuclear attacks on Israel “without signature,” by proxies, or by mistake. And, additional nuclear attack contingencies may emerge, which are at present inconceivable and unthinkable.

Neither the structure of Iranian decision making nor the values of the decision makers are adequately known. Therefore it is indeterminate whether the evaluation that the probability of a nuclear attack on Israel is low is just a “story” that we tell ourselves, on the basis of our own values and institutions. Furthermore, there is no historical precedent that can serve as a baseline for evaluating what Iran may do once it has nuclear weapons, nor is there a reliable theory on which to base this evaluation. It follows that the possibility of a nuclear attack on Israel cannot be excluded, however low the probability may seem. While the likelihood of Iran using nuclear weapons for attacking Israel may be unknowable, this must not be misunderstood as implying that the likelihood is necessarily small.

In addition to the danger to Israel posed by Iranian nuclear weapons, there is also the threat of the indirect use of such weapons for deterrence purposes – though at a much lower level of severity than a nuclear attack. For instance, Iran could declare that the entry of Israeli ground forces into Lebanon after a large-scale rocket attack by Hizballah will be considered a “declaration of war on Iran.”

Israel must also consider how it could reduce the danger of an Iranian nuclear attack by combining a multi-level defense system with ultimate deterrence. Such a defense system, which among other elements would include the wide deployment of Iron Dome, can help. But due to both technical and economic limitations, it would be impossible to hermetically seal Israel against the penetration of rockets, missiles or other platforms carrying nuclear weapons. Other methods of getting nuclear weapons into Israeli, which cannot be completely prevented, have to be taken into account as well.

Israel must possess “ultimate deterrence,” making it clear to adversaries that a very damaging attack against Israel will result in

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their destruction, however hard Israel may be hit. Israel already displays such an image, but it needs strengthening. This deterrence posture would also provide Israel with much freedom of action while ignoring Iranian threats that it will regard specific Israeli actions as a “declaration of war” that could provoke a nuclear attack. However, even harsh and fully credible deterrence does not provide full assurance against a direct or indirect nuclear attack by Iran.

Relations between Israel and Iran are dissimilar to the relations of the US and USSR during the Cold War, where stable mutual deterrence was achieved, though not perfectly, as illustrated by the Cuban Missile Crisis. They are also dissimilar to the prevailing India-Pakistan situation, where there are many relations on various levels between the countries and neither one claims that the other has no right to exist. Furthermore, the regime and governance patterns in Iran are not stable and the leadership may in some situations be pushed to engage in “crazy” behavior.

This leads to the question: What is the expected damage to Israel of a nuclear attack? Israel is a strong county with a robust society that is increasingly preparing for grave crises situations. However, lessons from the use of relatively primitive and weak nuclear weapons against Japan are sufficient to justify apprehensions that although Israeli cities are built of reinforced concrete, not like Japan at that time, a small number of nuclear bombs hitting population centers can have very grave results and in some circumstance may also endanger the state's existence.

To be taken into account, though without exaggeration, are also the potential negative impacts on Israeli society due to living under the shadow of an Iranian nuclear threat, however ambiguous. Despite the toughness of Israel's citizenry, there could be harmful consequences for immigration (*aliyah*), investments in the country, tourism, and more.

Additional concerns include potential Iranian attrition efforts – using ambiguous nuclear threats with no actual use of nuclear weapons. This would be part of a long term grand strategy to weaken Israel in stages, as discussed in Arab strategic writings and hinted at by some

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Iranian leaders. Such efforts cannot succeed, but they may prolong and also aggravate the Arab-Israeli conflict with costs for all sides.

This leads necessarily to the appraisal that the possession of nuclear weapons by Iran will cause with certainty substantive damage to Israel's national security. Furthermore, and this is the critical danger, Iran is liable to use nuclear weapons against Israel, causing grievous damage with serious consequences also for the Jewish people as a whole. By doing so, Iran will bring about its destruction, together with causing great damage to large parts of the Middle East and substantive harm to the world. This, however, does not change the graveness of such a contingency for Israel. Therefore, Israel must do all that it can to eliminate such a possibility, even if its realization likelihood is low – which is not certain, in view of it being in important respects unknowable. The recommended principle for coping with irreducible uncertainty by adopting a posture of measured pessimism further reinforces this conclusion.

### **MULTIPLIED DANGERS OF A NUCLEAR MIDDLE EAST**

If the dangers posed by a nuclear Iran were not grave enough, Tehran's known possession of nuclear weapons or its capacity to produce them within a short time frame is very likely to cause a chain reaction, leading additional regional actors to endeavor to produce or acquire nuclear weapons. This would probably include Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and Egypt, and possibly extend to Turkey and others.

Given the instability of the Middle East, however, it is impossible to rely on a stable, multi-state nuclear balance, which is inherently problematic. Even if governments were careful to contain their nuclear programs, there would be justified apprehensions over the potential leakage of nuclear weapons to fanatic actors. And prudent behavior by governments, including unstable and pressed ones, is far from assured.

Such a situation may bring about forceful intervention by major powers, all of whom share a strong interest in preventing Armageddon wars in the Middle East, but this too is far from guaranteed. Therefore, there is strong cause for concern that the

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possession of nuclear weapons by Iran will bring about a nuclear Middle East in which the likelihood of nuclear action, including against Israel, would multiply. This scenario further supports taking all possible measures to prevent Iran from possessing nuclear weapons or the ability to produce them on short notice, including an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities if other efforts fail or are unreliable.

### **DIPLOMACY, SANCTIONS AND OTHER PRESSURES**

Establishments and decision makers suffer from an unavoidable bias that causes them to see ambiguous realities in ways which do not commit them to engage in actions that they do not wish to take. Since there is no desire to get confounded in military action against Iran, many decision makers consequently cling to the belief that diplomacy and sanctions will eventually work, while interpreting ambiguous intelligence as leaving time until military action becomes necessary. The West's optimistic trust in diplomacy further adds to the likelihood of distorted hopes concerning Iranian behavior. The history of intelligence failures before the Second Gulf War, which included incorrect findings on Iraq's nuclear capabilities, may also lead to the internalization of the wrong lessons, hindering timely recognition of what Iran is up to.

As a case in point, Iran's current negotiations with six world powers and contribution to a "good atmosphere" are perceived as indicating the likelihood of a compromise, which the West can accept. However, showing a readiness to negotiate, creating a good atmosphere, and expressing some optimism could be an Iranian strategy to simply gain time to advance its nuclear plans while immunizing its facilities against a possible attack.

Thus, in the absence of a reliable method to evaluate what really stands behind the Iranian negotiation behavior, the correct conclusion is to not reach any conclusion but to prevent the prolongation of negotiations. Yet, an unwillingness to reach the "hour of truth," which would require undesirable military action, together with a Western bias toward trusting diplomacy and "good will," perpetuate the danger of Iran utilizing the negotiations in order to advance its nuclear plans.

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It may well be that Israel suffers from the opposite bias – the interpretation of ambiguous information in a pessimistic manner – due to the lessons of Jewish history and its perspective on the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, it is more likely that Iran is determined to develop nuclear weapons, and there is only a minimal chance that diplomacy and sanctions will make it abandon its nuclear ambitions. Furthermore, it is likely that Iran will take advantage of such diplomacy in order to gain time to improve its immunity against an attack on its nuclear facilities. The possibility that one morning Iran will surprise the world by declaring possession of nuclear weapons cannot be excluded.

One cannot be certain that this is the correct assessment. Certainly it is necessary to try to influence Iran through increased sanctions, give diplomacy a chance and possibly avoid the necessity to use military force with all its risks. But it is not permissible to let this preference come instead of forceful action if diplomacy and sanctions do not bring about reliably desired results while the Iranian nuclear facilities are still vulnerable to attack. It is also necessary to avoid an overly optimistic assessment of the length of time available for an Israeli military action against the Iranian nuclear facilities before they are dispersed and hardened and essentially made immune.

It is relevant to consider that if Iran is allowed to develop a nuclear weapons capability, the chances of then swaying Tehran to give up its weapons are extremely low. Iran is not similar to Libya, which agreed under Western pressures and incentives to turn over its weapons program. On the contrary, one of the reasonable lessons that Iranian leaders can draw from what happened to the rulers of Libya is not to give up nuclear weapons but to strengthen them.

Furthermore, the West must not be misled by baseless assessments that the Iranian regime will soon change for the better. Rather, the possession of nuclear weapons will likely strengthen the current regime and garner greater public support due to the pride taken in nuclear achievement. Additionally, once Tehran controls nuclear weapons, great care must be taken not to push Iran's rulers into a corner as this may cause them to adopt “Samson’s Posture.” It follows

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that possession of nuclear weapons will make it more difficult and more risky to try and bring about changes in the Iranian regime.

### **THE UNITED STATES' ROLE**

Many in Israel believe that the United States should be the one tasked with preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Without doubt, it would be better for Israel if the US does what is necessary, including military action, in order to achieve this goal.

US President Barack Obama has clearly declared that he will not let Iran have nuclear weapons. He also promised this to Israel's leaders, according to some reports. While there is no doubt about the sincerity of his intentions, and though his credibility is bound to keeping his word, this still does not guarantee that the US would use military force to prevent Iran's nuclearization.

Looking at the situation from a different, somewhat counter-conventional angle, it is possible that US interests lie in letting Israel attack the nuclear facilities of Iran thereby reducing damage to American interests. The US would afterwards step in "to restore peace" and implement steps to prevent Iran from renewing its nuclear efforts. However, there are no indications that this is the view of US decision makers. Albeit, from an Israeli perspective it is clearly preferable that the US lead the attack and that Israel remain on the sidelines. But, as mentioned, one cannot be sure that the US will take on this role.

The US definitely has the capacity to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities, though with the passage of time this becomes more difficult and requires more intrusive action. As well, the US has the capability to prevent further Iranian attempts to develop nuclear weapons. It may also have the ability to make a positive change in the Iranian regime, though this is a complex and problematic process, as demonstrated by developments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

However a number of considerations may prevent the US from actually using force against Iran. Iranian nuclear weapons are only to a small extent a serious direct danger to the US, in glaring contrast to

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the situation of Israel. They may be used to damage US interests in the Middle East or harm American allies in the region. Also, their development will hurt America's credibility. Moreover, one cannot exclude the possibility that in the future, in extreme situations, Iranian nuclear weapons could be used, directly or indirectly, to attack the US itself – but this is somewhat farfetched.

The view that it is not in its interest to attack Iran seems to be widely accepted in US policy discourse, including the opinions of its heads of military. Many think that US military action against Iran may cause wars in parts of the Middle East and that the export of oil could be seriously curtailed. But it is doubtful that Iran would risk a heavy US counterstrike by attacking American targets and/or allies in the Middle East. It is more likely that Iran's reaction to a US attack on its nuclear facilities would be restrained, though this is far from certain. In any case, the maximum damage that an Iran without nuclear weapons can inflict on the US and its allies is limited.

It should be noted that a lot of US views on the grave dangers posed to US forces and interests by an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities are at best doubtful appraisals that seem to rely primarily on various simulations. But much care must be exercised when using simulation exercises for issues involving the complex judgment of decision makers. Simulations, with the help of computers, are very useful mainly for quasi-statistical and technical evaluations, for example mapping the range of likely results of air attacks with known weapons and targets. However, simulations of complex issues such as Iranian reactions to an Israeli (or American) attack, in which various persons "play" the role of heads of the Iranian government and so on, with or without partial use of computer programs/models, can help by stimulating thinking but cannot supply useful predictions. Therefore, for instance, it is a serious error to rely on the March 2012 US Central Command (CENTCOM) exercise simulating the repercussions of a possible Israeli attack on Iran. This simulation presumed to predict serious consequences for the region and the US, including – according to what was published in the media – a substantive though not great number of US soldiers killed. But this has no relation to what would really happen, other than indicating one possible outcome.

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A forward look (not “prediction”) at the range of possible Iranian decisions and acts following an American or Israeli attack requires a careful and complex analysis, the results of which must be looked at with some skepticism. The best set of diverse outlook approaches will only be able to map a number of scenarios out of many, to mark some of them as more or less likely, and to indicate the maximum that Iran can do, given its capabilities as far as known, but not more than that. It is not possible to foresee “surprises” which often occur in such situations, all the more so when the Iranian regime and its decision processes are not understood and the event is unique in many respects. But it is possible to explore some of the main considerations, such as expected caution by Iran not to provoke the US to heavily counter attack and the need of the Iranian rulers not to appear weak in the eyes of their citizens or the world.

In order to understand the approach of US decision makers on the issue and what can be expected from them, it is also necessary to take into account the background of what is widely regarded as the failure of military-civilian action in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, together with the economic crisis and public opposition to getting involved in another war with all the “body bags.” It seems that the US military is hesitant to get involved in a violent conflict with Iran, frequently warning about harm to US forces and other grave consequences of an Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities. Whether correct or not, the presentation of such outlooks is a significant factor likely to influence US behavior. Yet, foreseeing what the American President will decide in the moment of truth in unpredictable circumstances is impossible – all the more so as his choice has no clear fateful implications for the future of the US.

The many declarations being made before the 2012 presidential elections too are not a guarantee on what will be done after the elections. It is quite possible that even if the only way to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons is large-scale US military action, the US will refrain from attacking the Iranian nuclear facilities whatever the reasons are. Instead, the US will likely supply Israel with improved defensive capabilities, such as large budgets for increasing Iron Dome’s expanse and the Arrow’s deployment, and perhaps with formal guarantees against an Iranian nuclear attack, something that

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would be treated as an attack on US forces. Additional offers may include the placement of symbolic US forces in Israel, strengthened Israeli participation in NATO, and some form of assistance for Israel's ultimate deterrence posture. These would be substitutes for American preventive military action to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities. But all of them, however helpful, cannot annul the main dangers posed by Iranian nuclear weapons to the national security of Israel.

These are not reliably predictions but realistic outlooks on some of the possibilities that may happen. Therefore, those who claim that the job of dealing with Iranian nuclear armament should be left to the US are right only if they assume that Israeli national security can be preserved even if Iran becomes nuclear. However, according to the analysis presented in this paper, this is not true. A nuclear Iran would constitute a very serious danger to Israel despite defensive measures, ultimate deterrence, guarantees, and various forms of assistance. The emerging daunting conclusion is that Israel cannot leave the final decision of whether to launch a preemptive strike against Iran up to the US.

From an Israeli perspective, US military action as a last resort for denying nuclear weapons to Iran is much preferable overall to Israeli action. Nonetheless, Israel cannot be sure that this will happen. Therefore, the inescapable recommendation, however demanding and perhaps presumptuous, is that if there remains no other option, Israel will have to act on its own.

### **CONSEQUENCES OF AN ISRAELI ATTACK**

Before finalizing such a radical recommendation, it is necessary to examine the expected consequences of an Israeli attack both optimistically and pessimistically, within the working assumption that an Israeli attack will indeed prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons for at least a number of years.

The expected costs to Israel include direct and indirect attacks on Israel by Iran and those acting on its behalf, as well as negative

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impacts on Israel's relations with the US and other countries, its international standing, and on the future of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

There are contradictory views expressed in Israeli public discourse on the expected damage from an Iranian direct and indirect violent reaction to an Israeli attack. However, these will not be discussed here, as all of them are baseless or based on classified studies not obtainable for critical evaluation. Concerning the matter itself, even using pessimistic assumptions, the damages caused to Israel as a reaction to its attack on Iran's nuclear facilities will be significantly smaller than the expected damages caused by a nuclear attack carried out by Iran or on its behalf, or as a result of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East spurred by the possession of nuclear weapons by Iran. It will also be smaller than the attrition caused to Israel by a continuous Iranian nuclear threat.

Furthermore, an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities leaves available to Israel the full strength of its forces, which can deter attacks against Israel and also reduce the ability of Iran and its allies to engage in them. For instance, although escalation is undesirable, Israel would be able to hit other targets in Iran if it reacts in intolerable ways to the Israeli action. Hizballah and Hamas will also be exposed to forceful Israeli reactions if they attack it with rockets and missiles. This may even give Israel an opportunity to engage in important operations that are not feasible politically under ordinary circumstances. Such possibilities are quite clear to the heads of Hamas and Hizballah and may deter them from efforts to attack Israel even if directed to do so by Iran, as hinted at in some of their pronouncements. But Israel cannot rely on such an optimistic possibility, however reasonable.

Given pessimistic assumptions, potential damage to Israel as a result of an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities does not negate the recommendation to attack if there is no other way to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. But there is a possible and very important exception to this assessment, namely the danger of a delayed revenge strike by Iran with newly developed nuclear weapons. The serious nature of this contingency will be discussed in the next part of the paper.

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Concerning relations with the US, it is very likely that an Israeli attack despite US wishes would substantially hurt the bilateral relation. If the US or its forces were to be hit directly by Iran, it would be dragged into Middle East wars, oil prices would jump, and so on, the damage to Israel's relations with the USA can be serious. This possibility would not necessarily depend on the outcome of the 2012 US presidential elections.

As mentioned previously, it is likely that Iran will take care not to provoke the US and its partners into taking tough action against Iran, including perhaps changing the Iranian regime as may be within the abilities of the US but not of Israel. Therefore, as noted, frequently expressed opinions on "regional wars," "oil scarcity," the prolonged closing of the Straits of Tiran, and so on are probably exaggerated. However, to repeat the caveat that must accompany all such outlooks, this optimistic assessment may be wrong.

From a broad, long term perspective, even if Iran's reaction to an Israeli attack causes substantial damage, it will be significantly lesser than the grave consequences for the US and other countries of an Iranian nuclear attack on Israel and a subsequent Israeli counterstrike, which will damage large parts of the Middle East, not to mention large-scale collateral damage. All this justifies an Israeli attack if this is the only way to prevent Iran from realizing its nuclear ambitions. But matters may look differently from an American perspective, particularly that of the political echelons, the army, and the greater public.

There is a real possibility that relations between Israel and the US will be materially damaged as a result of an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities launched contrary to the expressed wishes of the US President. However, this apprehension does not change the imperative for an Israeli attack on the Iranian nuclear facilities if otherwise Iran will acquire nuclear weapons. The special relationship between the US and Israel has a strong foundation and can be reestablished, but Iranian nuclear weapons will endanger Israel for a long time. Still, an Israeli strike must be accompanied by innovative Israeli initiatives to reduce the damage to US-Israel relations and encourage US action that will prevent any rehabilitation of Iran's nuclear activities. A

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recommended Israeli initiative meeting this requirement will be suggested below.

Israel's overall international standing may also be hurt, at least for a short time. However, a substantive number of states will be glad that Israel relieved them of the dangers of Iranian nuclear weapons. Formal condemnations, legal actions and so forth are of minor significance compared to the risks involved in Iran having nuclear weapons, and can provide welcome opportunities to Israel to present its case. Even so, maintaining good international standing is important for Israel and reinforces the necessity for compensatory Israeli steps accompanying an attack on Iran.

With regard to other regional actors, there is good evidence that most Middle East rulers, including new ones, will be glad if Israel removes the danger of a nuclear Iran, even though they are unlikely to declare this in public. But the Arab street reaction may be very hostile, which could put anti-Israel pressures on various governments. This will require creative Israeli efforts to address Arab publics, while taking precautionary measures against hostile acts.

Decisive Israeli action against the Iranian nuclear facilities may enable Israel to strengthen its deterrence by showing that it intends and is able to act with determination against various forms of aggression. But there is also reason to worry that an Israeli attack will aggravate parts of the Arab-Israeli conflict – for instance, the peace treaty with Egypt could erode due to domestic pressures demanding action against Israel following a strike on an Islamic state. In any case, a successful Israeli action against the nuclear facilities of Iran is unlikely by itself to improve the persistently dangerous dynamics of the Arab-Israeli conflict as a whole and may aggravate parts of it. Within this dynamic, every local Israeli success is followed by new forms of hostility and aggression against Israel and its very existence. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how an Israeli attack could be utilized for coping with the depth of the Arab-Israeli conflict, as will be further discussed.

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### **REVENGE-SEEKING IRAN**

It is still necessary to examine the grave possibility that while Israeli military action will delay the development of Iranian nuclear weapons, it will at the same time reinforce the determination of Tehran's rulers, with much domestic public support, to develop such weapons and later take revenge on Israel. Furthermore, if Iran presently does not regard Israel as its main enemy at which nuclear weapons would be directed – even though Iran's rulers have made clear their desire to wipe Israel off the map – a preemptive Israeli attack may turn Israel into enemy number one.

This likely development requires brooding and preparation. It will be necessary in the attack to reduce harm to Iranian civilians as much as possible. Also essential will be efforts to explain to the Iranian people that responsibility lies with its leaders who forced upon Israel a targeted military action despite the history of prosecution shared by the Shiite people and the Jews, the respect of Israel for Iran and its culture, and Israeli society's strong desire to live in peace with the Iranian people. But illusions must be avoided: An Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities will surely anger large parts of the Iranian population, including parts of the opposition, reinforcing the determination of its leaders again to develop nuclear weapons and then make Israel pay a high price for its attack.

Therefore, as touched on earlier, Israel must make a concerted effort after hitting the Iranian facilities to prevent Iran from developing or acquiring nuclear weapons. This must be done in coordination with the US and other powers, by forcing a change in the Iranian regime, using a variety of preventative actions, or if necessary through additional military measures. An Israeli Middle East peace initiative, as presented below, can be very useful in bringing about such action and may be essential for it.

In any case, Israeli ultimate deterrence – made all the more credible due to the Israeli military action – will have to be maintained at full strength as long as there is no stable peace in the Middle East and its environs. But it will require strengthening if Iran should acquire nuclear weapons after an Israeli attack.

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Despite all of these hopes and considerations, Israel must not ignore the possibility that if, even after an attack on its nuclear facilities, Iran still succeeds in developing or acquiring nuclear weapons despite Israeli and other efforts, and if it seeks revenge against Israel, then Israel's situation may be worse than if it had refrained from the initial attack. If this paper were to reach the conclusion that the emergence of such a situation was likely, then it would refrain from recommending an attack. However the assessment herein is that this danger can be reduced to an extent justifying an Israeli attack, on condition that it is accompanied by a broad effort to change the momentum of the Arab-Israeli conflict for the better – in ways that will diminish, contain, and with time end the Iranian danger.

### **MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROPOSAL**

An Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, with all its repercussions, requires the creative reconsideration of Israel's national security policy, including the following four principles: (1) maintenance and reinforcement of multi-level deterrence, including ultimate deterrence, utilizing the opportunity provided by the military action; (2) maximum effort to prevent renewed Iranian efforts to develop or acquire nuclear weapons, together with preparations for this eventuality; (3) reexamination of all of Israel's doctrines on use of force so as to adjust them to new realities, including the irreversible effects of an attack on Iran; and (4) improvements in the protection of the home front. All of the above require additions to the defense budget, unless and until a significant improvement occurs in the overall Arab-Israeli conflict.

This brings this paper to the political-external relations dimension, which in many respects is becoming increasingly critical. The requirement to fully integrate "security" and "foreign relations," including peace process perspectives, which became acute long ago, is becoming even more pressing in connection with Iran's nuclear policy. But, from what has been published, it is not clear that Israel is in fact achieving this essential integration, which requires, inter alia, linking its confrontation with the Iranian nuclear danger to innovative coping with the Arab-Israeli conflict as a whole.

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As already noted, an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities requires parallel political action to contain and reduce damage to Israel resulting from that attack, which could be serious. This is also essential for mobilizing the efforts needed to prevent Iran from renewing its nuclear program. At the same time, the turmoil inevitably caused by an Israeli military action may provide an opportunity to significantly improve Israel's international and security situation if it properly utilizes the openness to change provided by the reduced rigidity of historical processes resulting from the crisis.

It would be beneficial, and indeed essential, for Israel, therefore, to put forth a comprehensive Middle East peace proposal based in part on the Arab-Islamic peace initiative 10 years ago. Such an Israeli initiative would be necessary even without attacking Iran's nuclear facilities. But, given such an attack, the initiative becomes all the more critical, urgent, and opportune.

The peace proposal should aim to achieve a number of objectives. Primarily it should endeavor to reduce and perhaps eliminate the long-term dangers to Israel's national security posed by the continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and to advance in stages towards peaceful coexistence with Arab and Islamic states and societies. Until then, it should prevent the escalation of the conflict, strengthen already existing peace agreements, and enable the improvement of relations with important Islamic countries such as Turkey.

Second, it should aim to mobilize an international and Middle East effort to prevent Iran from repeat attempts at developing nuclear weapons, under the leadership of the US and other major powers, and with the cooperation of interested Middle East states.

Third, it should attempt to reduce harm to the global standing of Israel caused by an attack on the Iranian nuclear facilities and its collateral damage. This would include moving most of the discourse from the attack to the peace initiative, with the Palestinian issue being an important component but not the most critical one.

Fourth, and in many respects critical to all the rest, the peace proposal

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should seek to prevent the deterioration of Israel-US relations and add a new and strong foundation for cooperation, which should include advancing a comprehensive Middle East agreement. Correlated to this, in complex ways, will be the radical upgrading of relations with the emerging superpower China, on the assumption that the future of global security will eventually depend on cooperation between the US and China.

It is not necessary to discuss here the details of the proposed Middle East peace initiative, which are presented in other publications.<sup>1</sup> The Israeli initiative should be presented in terms of principles, in a way that is serious and credible. It is enough if initially it mentions the Arab-Islamic Peace Initiative, connects the new initiative to present regional processes, and enumerates a number of central components. These should include, for instance, the establishment of a comprehensive and stable Middle East peace as a basis for the development and thriving of the region and its inhabitants, Israeli withdrawals and an accord on Jerusalem, full relations between Israel and Arab and Islamic states including measures to “break hostility,” reliable security arrangements, a Palestinian state, a solution to the refugee problem, progressive stages towards turning the Middle East into an environment free of weapons of mass killing after a stable peace and credible security arrangements are established, and more.

The agreement will be open to all Middle East states and additional countries involved in the conflict that accept its principles, including Iran. Israel should declare that it is ready to start immediately intensive negotiations directed at achieving such an agreement.

Ongoing regional events, including turbulence, street action, unstable regimes, hostilities, and violence could easily lead Arab and other Islamic actors as well as Israeli decision makers to reject the idea of a peace initiative as “utopian” and not worthy of serious consideration. This, however, would be a serious mistake, ignoring both the pressing need for a comprehensive peace process by Middle East countries, including Israel, and the opportunities afforded by the prevailing

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<sup>1</sup> Yehezkel Dror, *Israeli Statecraft*, op cit., pp. 161-175.

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conditions for a suitably structured and presented peace initiative. Both the need and the opportunity are made more acute by an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, a situation that emphasizes the need to put the Middle East on a different historical trajectory.

The advantages for Israel of initiating a Middle East peace proposal in conjunction with actions to reduce the dangers posed to the Middle East by Iran's nuclear weapons program are in part independent of its immediate realization likelihood. The serious presentation of such an initiative is very likely to significantly improve Israeli's situation if the initiative is indeed substantive and not just cosmetic. Coordinating the initiative with the US and other potential supporters, including some Middle East countries, and carefully timing its presentation, could significantly augment its chance of positively impacting on the situation of Israel and of the region as a whole.

Israel should present a Middle East peace initiative even if it does not attack Iran's nuclear facilities, either because Iran stopped its nuclear activities due to sanctions or other causes, or because the US attacked the nuclear facilities with or without linkage to an Israeli peace initiative. Should Iran abandon its efforts to possess nuclear weapons capabilities this too may provide an optimal opportunity for launching the Israeli peace initiative. However, presenting this peace initiative while Iran continues to develop nuclear weapons may be regarded as a sign of weakness and cannot be recommended before further consideration of actual developments.

### **RECOMMENDATION: ATTACK INTEGRATED WITH PEACE INITIATIVE**

In considering the pros and cons of attacking the nuclear facilities of Iran, integration with an Israeli peace initiative may determine the long-term outcome. It is likely to reduce significantly the risk of damaging relations with the US and can facilitate efforts to prevent Iran from renewing its nuclear activities. Integrating military action against Iran's nuclear facilities with a Middle East peace initiative is synergetic in its positive effects on the short and long-term national security of Israel. If integrated properly, the benefits – including damage limitation – are likely to be multiplicative, not additive, of the benefit of each action taken separately.

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This paper will not go so far as to fully condition the recommendation to attack Iran's nuclear facilities on Israel combining the attack with a serious Middle East peace initiative, with all that this implies. However, lacking such a combination, the validity of the recommendation to attack the Iranian nuclear facilities is weakened.

Therefore, the overall recommendation is double-tracked: Attack the Iranian nuclear facilities as long as this is possible, if there is no other way to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, and integrate the attack with the presentation of a serious Israeli comprehensive Middle East peace initiative.

### **POLITICAL AND GOVERNMENTAL FEASIBILITY**

Israel is a democratic state with a parliamentary-cabinet coalition regime that makes it difficult to reach decisions on hotly debated subjects, even when non-decision or procrastinatory compromise are the worst of all alternatives. Israel also suffers from problems with its staff work, such as in handling thick uncertainty, and the quality of its decision processes, including a tendency to adopt narrow perspectives, despite many improvements in recent years. Therefore, the political and governmental feasibility of the recommendations requires examination.

As already explained, it is the duty of members of government to act according to their best judgment and substantive conscience. Furthermore, when an issue of cardinal importance for the future of Israel is on the agenda they have to ignore all types of domestic political and personal career interests. Accordingly, even if most of the public would oppose military action against the Iranian nuclear facilities and it is expected that those who back such an operation will lose the next elections, it is still the duty of the heads of government to attack the nuclear facilities if, in their best judgment, this is essential for the long-term national security of Israel.

While this normative requirement poses some practical difficulties, these do not demand discussion in the context of an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. The government has no real problem with public opinion on this matter. In any case, the attitudes of most of the public

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after an Israeli action will be determined by the perception of results and similar factors and not by their views before the operation – which in this matter are not “against.” Therefore, even if it would have been justified to take into account public opinion in this decision, which in principle it is not, this in no way would act against the recommendation to attack Iran if there was no other way to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Concerning the views of the Forum of Eight,<sup>2</sup> where in fact the tough decision will be made – though it requires approval by a larger forum – its members are well qualified. Disagreements on so critical and complex an issue as military action against the Iranian nuclear facilities are justified. But the Prime Minister and Defense Minister, who carry most of the responsibility for dealing with Iran, will most probably be able to convince a majority of the Forum, and later of the government, to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities if they reach the conclusion that this is essential.

The situation is very different in respect to a comprehensive Middle East peace initiative with all the Israeli steps that it entails. This is an initiative whose realization will, in the best of cases, take quite some time, and it is not certain that in fact there will be much progress in this direction as long as the present situation in the Middle East continues. But the very act of presenting the initiative involves conditional Israeli commitments on subjects under intense ideological and security debate.

My reading of the political situation in Israel, on which there will be disagreements, is that if the Prime Minister is convinced of the joint utility and necessity of a combined attack on Iran and presentation of a comprehensive peace initiative, he can act accordingly with limited political risks. This conclusion is independent of the date of the elections to the 19<sup>th</sup> Knesset, as preparations for the elections and their results must not influence Israel's decision vis-à-vis Iran. A successful Israeli action against the Iranian nuclear facilities will

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<sup>2</sup> The Forum of Eight is an assembly of eight (previously seven) key ministers from the main coalition parties. Though not having formal status, this is the forum where all important security and foreign policy issues, as well as related matters, are discussed and decided, subject to approval by formal forums as may be required.

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further help mobilize the necessary political and public support for the peace initiative, if well presented.

Therefore, my conclusion is that the recommendation to integrate an attack with a peace initiative is politically and socially feasible, even if progress towards agreement will require elections focusing on this issue and perhaps a referendum. But these are issues for a more distant future, which do not interfere with acting according to the recommendation to present an Israeli Middle East peace initiative in conjunction with attacking the Iranian nuclear facilities.

It may sound strange to those who are not familiar with the modus operandi of Israeli governments, but Israeli governance (like most others) has difficulties in dealing at the same time with two hard external relations-security decisions, with all the involved staff work, decision making processes and implementation efforts. Many Israelis in the know will argue that working at the same time on attacking the nuclear facilities of Iran and presenting an Israeli Middle East peace initiative is an “overload” that the Israeli governance system cannot handle.

They have a case. But this is not as great a difficulty as posed by deep societal disagreements on the peace process. The work processes in governance depend on governance itself, all the more so as no overall reform is required but an effort involving a number of select units. Therefore, the argument of “overload” cannot and need not be allowed to override the advantages of the double-tracked recommendation.

What must and can be done is to make sure that the National Security Council is in charge of overall integrative staff work, with special attention to synthesizing the military dimensions, on the one hand, and the foreign relations dimensions and peace initiative, on the other, into a synergetic whole. At the same time, without interfering with the military staff work, the National Security Council must provide the Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, Forum of Eight, and additional decision making bodies with a “second look” on the military aspects, as the seriousness of the matter requires. All this fits the 2008 National Security Staff Law, but is essential also without the law, as

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clearly recommended by the Winograd Committee as well as the Lipkin Shahak Implementation Committee following the Second Lebanon War. It is up to the Prime Minister, together with the Minister of Defense, to make sure that this is done despite various bureaucratic and other obstacles.

## CONCLUSION

My conclusion is that the recommendation to attack, integrated with a peace initiative, is very likely to be feasible, if the Prime Minister and the other senior ministers deliberate and behave as high quality leaders, as I think they are capable of doing if they try as hard as the issues at stake require.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I am grateful to the Director of the Begin-Sadat Center, Professor Efraim Inbar, for many years of collaboration and for comments which significantly contributed to this paper, though the responsibility for it is mine. I also appreciate very much the high quality work of the BESA Center staff, with special gratitude for excellent editing to Alona Briner Rozenman and Ilana Hart.