July 30th

**What would induce a strike against Iran, and what would happen after?**

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On a dark night in the spring of 2023, Israeli military aircraft infiltrated Iranian airspace and attacked vital facilities associated with the Iranian nuclear program. Intelligence organizations worldwide focused their efforts on gathering information that will lead to an understanding of the attack’s ramifications and its damage to the Iran’s nuclear abilities. According to assessments across the world, the attack completely destroyed Iran’s centrifuge array as well as other facilities suspected of developing nuclear weapons (the Iranian weapons group), and delivered a fatal blow to several other nuclear targets.

**This scenario is not fictitious**. If Iran continues to approach a nuclear threshold, if she enriches uranium to a level of 90% and renews the activity of the weapons groups, the United States and Israel will be forced to take action to fulfill their leaders’ commitment that “Iran will never hold nuclear weapons.”

For obvious reasons, this article **will not describe the attack itself**, but rather, the political and technological circumstances that led to it. I will outline three possible futures for the “phase” that follows, discussing Iran’s response to the attack, including the way in which it intends to rebuild its nuclear capacity, and the ramifications of the crisis on the regional and international structure.

**How did we arrive at the attack scenario?**

The world powers failed to persuade Teheran to “back down” from a line of demands which diverged from the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA). Iran continued to raise demands that Biden’s administration considered unacceptable, while broadening its nuclear program as leverage for gaining additional concessions and undermining the original clauses of the nuclear deal. Iran also continued the production and activation of advanced centrifuges, hoarded highly enriched uranium, processed the uranium to metallic form, and more. In response, the United States firmly enforced existing sanctions and imposed additional punitive measures against the Iranian regime, exacerbating the economic situation and the public discontent in Iran.

Biden’s government lost its majority in the House of Representatives during the midterm elections, increasing doubts regarding his candidacy in the 2024 elections. Republican candidates for the presidency, on the other hand, unanimously announced that if the world powers and Iran revert to the nuclear deal, they will once again back off should they be elected.

This formed the backdrop for Iran’s announcement that it will not retreat to the nuclear deal, and the West, too, understood that under current conditions, returning to the JCPOA – whose central clauses have in any case been compromised, and will expire in about three years – is not worthwhile. This, since it would pave the way for Iran to become an internationally legitimate nuclear threshold state, with the international domain holding no leverage against the regime in Teheran. Concurrently, states in the Middle East, headed by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey, declare that they will not remain behind if Iran reaches nuclear weapon ability within a short time; and intelligence agencies worldwide conclude that the Middle East stands at the start of a nuclear arms race.

At the behest of their supreme leader, Iranians decide to punish the United States for not returning to the nuclear deal, acting on both the conventional and nuclear levels. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Quds force intensified their subversive and terrorist activities in the Middle East – a car bomb exploded on the base of the fifth fleet in Manama, Bahrain, killing fifteen American marines, and the Iranians attacked the oil field in Abkaik, causing oil prices to soar to $160 a barrel. Early in 2023 Iran announced that it started to enrich uranium to a level of 90% “for a nuclear-powered submarine project.” European countries decided to activate the SNAPBACK clause that goes into effect within a month. Iran then found itself not only under American sanctions, but under international ones as well.

The Iranian regime threatened to leave the NPT and disabled additional International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) cameras in Natanz and Fordo. At the same time, Israeli Intelligence identified signs of increased activity in Iranian organizations that had been involved in the development of nuclear weapons. Based on concentrated intelligence efforts, the Israeli Intelligence community reached the conclusion that Iran had decided to secretly “creep” toward a bomb, while taking advantage of the critical circumstances in the international arena. Iran estimated that the deep breach between the powers, who were busy dealing with the ongoing war in Ukraine and with the crisis in Taiwan, plus the strong support of Russia and China (even though they opposed an Iranian bomb), would prevent the United States from acting against Teheran.

Israel gathered its security cabinet. The professional echelon warned the political echelon that collecting fissile material enriched to a level of 90% is in itself a dangerous threshold, while crossing that threshold may make it difficult to halt Iran’s progress toward a nuclear bomb. Concurrently, Israel’s Military Intelligence Directorate and the Mossad receive highly reliable intimate intelligence that points to the reactivation of two weapons groups in Iran. Israel’s Prime Minister holds several marathon conferences with the IDF and security forces, who present a military plan, updated during the past two years, that can seriously damage Iran’s central nuclear facilities. The Prime Minister requests his cabinet to approve a focused operation against Iran’s nuclear program.

The Israeli government unanimously approve the operation in Iran, aimed at disabling most of Iran’s nuclear program components. Later, the Prime Minister will tell the government that he understood that Israel was left to fend for herself; he had felt the burden of historical responsibility upon his own shoulders, and was reminded of the words of Prime Minister Begin, who said, in 1981, that he had decided to strike against the plant in Iraq because he knew that if he didn’t command it, no one would.

**The “Day After” the attack: Three scenarios**

The Israeli strike shifts the ball to the Iranian court. Its military response, its regional activity, and the actions it decides to take on the nuclear plane will shape the reality of the “day after” the strike. Three lines of thought may guide the Iranian regime, leading to three different scenarios.

**Scenario #1**

**The operative principle: Iran fears that an all-out war with Israel and the United States will harm its stability.**

**The operative outcome: A limited and measured military response; the nuclear program is carefully reinstated.**

Iran is surprised by Israel’s attack, and officials high up in the regime speak of the “madness of the decision-makers in Jerusalem.” This leads the regime to a dilemma between wanting to retaliate with full force, to deter future strikes, and its fear of escalation which will lead to war. They estimate that severe damage to Iran’s national and military infrastructures during the war may weaken its standing, given the ongoing unrest among the Iranian masses that was only exacerbated by the recent events.

After several days of consultations, Iran launches dozens of missiles and unmanned aircraft (UAVs) toward Israel, only a few of which succeed in infiltrating Israel’s multilayered defense systems, causing a number of casualties and dozens of wounded in Haifa and Tel Aviv. The commander of the Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) also directs the organization’s special operations unit to carry out terrorist attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets throughout the world. However, today’s open and monitored world makes it difficult to immediately carry out significant attacks of this sort.

The commander of the Revolutionary Guard, Ismail Qaani, relates a directive in the name of Iran’s supreme leader Khamenei, to the head of Hizballah, Hassan Nasrallah. This directive commands him to attack Israel in a “measured but painful” manner. Surprisingly, Nasrallah responds with a hesitant missive. He clarifies his need for restraint, given the difficult situation in Lebanon, the collapse of the country’s infrastructures, the recently signed agreement between Israel and Lebanon regarding the international maritime border, and the general outrage in the country against any intervention which will benefit the Iranian foreign agenda.

Instead, Hizballah merely launches a few short-range missiles and mortar fire toward Israel’s border, aimed at open spaces, and without assuming responsibility. Given the organization’s lax response, the Iranians activate the Yemenite Houthis and Iraqi militia; however, their operational capabilities are limited. They fire a number of UAVs which Israel easily intercepts. Hamas condemns Israeli aggression and allows the Islamic Jihad to launch rockets from Gaza, but concurrently uses its “מגיני הספר” force to restrain the rocket launchers and to prevent them from increasing the fire. It seems that Hamas fears that within a regional conflict that will draw worldwide attention, Israel will allow herself to respond with unrestrained force against attacks from Gaza.

Given the limited extent of the damage, and their success in deflecting the Iranian rockets, Israel, too, decides to implement a policy of containment and moderation. She responds with local fire against launching sites on the Lebanese border and in Gaza while avoiding direct retaliation against targets within Iran. She also transmits messages to Iran, through the Iranian ambassador to the UN and Switzerland, warning that continued attacks against Israeli territory will be followed by more devastating damage to Iranian national infrastructures.

After a series of consultations, Iran decides to refrain from attacking American targets and interests in the area, and from interrupting the flow of crude oil through the Strait of Hormuz, which Iran itself uses to transport some of its oil to China and India. This decision is based on an Iranian appraisal that the United States was not involved in the Israeli attack, as well as concern that after Israel crossed its military threshold against her, the United States would respond to American injuries with a massive attack against governmental or military facilities within Iranian borders.

Regarding the nuclear issue, Iran once again declares its intention to leave the NPT, though she expresses hesitation in face of Russia and China’s objections (they also urge IAEA inspectors to remain in the country). She is also concerned that the move would accelerate Saudi Arabia’s efforts toward nucleation. Khamenei directs his people to quickly reconstruct the damaged nuclear and enrichment facilities, however, the work takes time given the need for replanning these facilities. Several months after the attack Khamenei dies, and Iran enters a sensitive period of regime change, including power and inheritance struggles. The nuclear project enters a long period of stagnation, and like the case in Iraq, it is not clear how, when, and whether Iran will ever renew the abilities it had before the strike.

**Scenario #2**

**The operative principle: Restoring Iranian deterrence while minimizing the risks.**

**The operative outcome: A mid-level military response; accelerating the nuclear program.**

The Iranian regime still chooses to refrain from massive retaliation and from entering an all-out conflict. Like the day after the assassination of Qassim Soleimani in January 2020, now too, Iran prefers a forceful yet limited response. They launch about 300 missiles and UAVs toward Israel in a few heavy volleys, challenging Israel’s interception systems. Israel suffers significant damages – dozens of casualties, hundreds of wounded, and serious damage to civilian infrastructures, though less so to military bases. Israel is content with mid-level counterattacks, mainly against Iranian ballistic bases, in an attempt to contain the confrontation, accepting that the price she paid is reasonable given the strategic achievement of halting the Iranian nuclear program. However, Israel warns that Iran will pay a high price if it continues the attacks. Iran stops, but threatens that this was only an initial response and Israel “will feel its full force at the time and place that Iran decides.”

Iran’s leader Khamenei directs Nasrallah to attack Israel forcefully, for this is the moment for which Iran nurtured the organization’s military abilities. Hizballah decides to launch volleys of rockets against Israel’s North, causing damage to property but no significant losses. Israel retaliates against Hizballah targets in South Lebanon, and both sides enter a few days of intense battle, where they both focus on military targets. The events do not escalate out of control and do not lead to total war.

Despite its dissatisfaction with the extent of Hizballah’s response, Iran refrains from exerting heavy pressure on the organization to enter a war against Israel. Decision-makers in Teheran estimate that depending too heavily on Hizballah will present Iran as dependent on them, which may cause a fatal blow to the organization’s stature in Lebanon, marking it for posterity as the one who brought about Lebanon’s final destruction due to foreign, Iranian considerations.

At the same time, the Iranian government is faced with the dilemma of whether to attack American forces in the Gulf. Teheran’s considerations are based on concern of dragging the United States into the escalating conflict and broadening it, a move which may lead to a strike against Iranian national infrastructures and to the continued deterioration of the regime’s internal stature, which it believed was damaged in the wake of Israel’s attack.

The Iranians decided that the appropriate response should be a nuclear one, a decision reminiscent of its response to the assassination of Soleimani (“The final revenge will include the complete removal of American forces from Iraq”). The Iranians declare a swift renewal of their nuclear program as well as accelerated progress toward robust nuclear abilities on a much wider scale than prior to the attack. This is meant to demonstrate, to the world, that the Israeli attack achieved the opposite of what it set out to achieve, and ensures that Iran would not be attacked again. Iranian nuclear engineers estimate that Iran would regain its pre-strike nuclear abilities within three years.

Iran seeks world sympathy. It decides that until the infrastructures are restored, they will not create a nuclear program for military use and will not withdraw from the NPT. However, they will limit the IAEA inspections, at least during the first stages of the facilities’ restoration.

**Scenario #3**

**The operative principle: Exacting a heavy price from Israel and the United States, even at the price of losses; a nuclear insurance policy.**

**The operative outcome: A massive regional nuclear response.**

Decision-makers in Iran reach the conclusion that to prevent similar attacks in the future, and to restore Iran’s deterrence, they must respond in a manner that will shock the region, the United States, and the entire international community.

Iran decides to utilize her ballistic and UAV abilities to their fullest extent. The IRGC launches three waves of missiles and UAVs toward populated centers in Israel, around 250 in each wave, with a few days’ respite between attacks.

Concurrently, Iran sends its people in the region explicit orders to attack Israel and the United States, as well as their allies Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and Bahrain. Shiite militia attack the green area in Baghdad and coalition bases in Iraq and the Houthi renew their UAV attack against Saudi Arabia, which had stopped following the ceasefire in Yemen. Yemen and Iraq each launch several missiles and UAVs against Israel. Iran also sends missiles from the Persian Gulf against Dubai, Abu Dhabi, the US fifth fleet in Bahrain, and American targets in Qatar. The IRGC navy blocks the Strait of Hormuz and mines it, exhibiting a massive presence in the region. An American aircraft carrier is attacked by both Torpedo missiles and UAVs, causing damage and several casualties.

Hizballah launches volleys of missiles toward Haifa, and the IDF responds by attacking Hizballah military targets in Lebanon. Within a few days the warfare gradually expands to missiles toward Tel Aviv on the one side, and toward the Dahieh suburb in Beirut on the other, where Israel attacks specific Hizballah targets. Both sides report dozens of casualties and injured. Israel attacks aerial defense systems which Iran and Syria supplied to Hizballah as well as the organization’s battery of precision strike missiles (PrSMs); she gathers forces along the border and prepares for ground maneuvers in Lebanon; and warns Hizballah that if they do not cease firing toward her territory, the Dahieh quarter will suffer exponentially greater damage than it had during the Second Lebanon War. Nasrallah threatens with another volley against Tel Aviv, and Israelis call for a massive attack on national infrastructures in Lebanon. In practice, both sides refrain from fully actualizing their military capabilities.

Regarding its nuclear program, Iran banishes IAEA inspectors, and her ambassador in Vienna announces Iran’s withdrawal from the NPT, as well as Iran’s intention to shift to a military nuclear plan which will ensure that she will never again be attacked by the “Zionists” and by “global arrogance.”

Israel and the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) decide to implement a joint offense against Iranian military capabilities and its national infrastructures. The United States clarifies that it will not initiate a ground invasion, however, every day in which Iran continues fighting it will continue to lose broad military and economic abilities. The American Navy declares a campaign to open the Strait of Hormuz and announces that any Iranian vessels in the area will be considered legitimate targets. At the same time, the US attacks IRGC missile systems, UAVs, aerial defense systems, and headquarters. Israel attacks a number of oil and gas facilities as well as governmental targets in Teheran, and declares that if Iran does not stop her escalating activities, additional strategic targets in Iran will be destroyed.

The conflict jacks up oil prices (to $220 a barrel). China and Europe suffered most from the inflated prices, and propose a resolution to the UN Security Council for a ceasefire. The United States supports the resolution. Russia abstains. Iran and Israel accept the resolution and the fighting ceases after two weeks of battle. In Lebanon, the ceasefire takes effect only a few days later, during which the IDF enters Lebanese territory near the border and bars incursion attempts by Hizballah’s elite “Radwan Force” unit into Israel.

Iran “licks its wounds” and invests her resources in restoration and the prevention of unrest among her people. The Iranian masses blame their leadership for misguided reasoning which led them to choose war and destruction instead of the nuclear deal which would have lifted the sanctions against them and boosted their economy.

**Conclusions**

Dragging the United States into a military confrontation in the Middle East following an Israeli attack against the Iranian nuclear program is not inevitable. A scenario in which limited hostilities, that do not involve the United States, is at least, or even more, as likely as one that does. It also depends on the United States: the less it frightens itself, and the more it projects determination to respond forcefully against any Iranian attack on its interests in the region, it is more likely to stay out of the conflict. Paradoxically, to prevent itself from getting sucked into military involvement in the area, the United States needs to be willing to enter the skirmish and respond with the kind of force that would create a credible deterrence against Iran.

A strong Iranian response throughout the region is also not the leading scenario. Iran may hesitate to take steps that will exacerbate her situation, given a forceful Israeli and American response that would cause Iran heavy damage beyond its nuclear program. Therefore, it would choose a strong, but focused and limited response. In addition, given Lebanon’s difficult situation, Hizballah would most likely not blindly execute every Iranian command to attack Israel, thus bringing about the final destruction of the cedar country.

Under these circumstances, a surgical attack against nuclear facilities, paired with a message that the target is only the nuclear program though Iran has additional strategic “assets” to lose, seems like the correct strategy. It holds tangible odds of limiting the extent of the clashes that will ensue following the Israeli move. This is true because, among other reasons, replacing the leadership in Iran was never an objective, and even if the conflict expands, there will be no acute need for “American boots” on Iranian soil.

Regarding the nuclear issue, an Israeli attack “shuffles the deck” and does not necessarily mark an inevitable vector in accelerating Iran’s nuclear program for military use. The United States and the international community need to decide how to exploit the Israeli move as leverage against Iran, to reach an improved nuclear deal and preserve Iranian membership in the NPT. This, after Iran had lost many of its significant assets and witnessed both the military capability and political determination to halt its progress toward a nuclear bomb.

In sum, US willingness to use the Israeli move as leverage and pose a determined and credible military threat against Iran will be a central factor in shaping “the day after” the attack, regarding its ability to handle Iran’s military retaliation in the area as well as its ability to risk the revival of Iran’s military nuclear project. The American response will be judged with a “magnifying glass” not only in Teheran but also in Beijing and in Moscow, in a way that may influence their policies in other arenas and on a global level.

In any case, an Israeli attack, should one take place, will necessarily be a “last resort” option, after the route of sanctions and diplomacy reaches a dead-end and Iran decides to creep or gallop toward nuclear weaponry. Under these circumstances, a military alternative – one that many of its critics claim will not stop the nuclear program, and may even accelerate it – becomes the preferred option, the alternative that would prevent the unbearable situation of Iranian progress toward a nuclear weapon. If this progress is not halted, there will be no way back.