

By Matthew Smith

Israel has a history of military intervention in Arab nuclear programs. In 1981 Israel launched an air strike that destroyed the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq. In 2007, the Israeli Air Force similarly attacked a partially constructed nuclear reactor in Syria after intelligence sharing with the United States. With Iran announcing the implementation of new third-generation centrifuges and improvements to its air defence systems, has an Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear targets become more probable? The answer to this question is yes, but not dramatically so. An early strike is still unlikely given the current political climate, the still needed for Iran to develop a capability and the limited likelihood of significantly hindering Iran's nuclear programme. The continued vulnerability of Iran's air defence network also removes the military necessity for action now.

Looking back on the history of Israeli military operations, it is rare for Israel to take any action without the support of Washington – and on the issue of bombing Iran, the response from the White House has been negative. The Obama administration has not yet exhausted all non-military means of containing Iran's nuclear program, and does not want to risk further destabilising an already fragile Middle East. Furthermore, the administration does not wish to antagonise Russia or China, both of whom are against military action in Iran. On 12th April, the Russian Chief of the General Staff stated that any attack on Israel would be "unacceptable", whilst Chinese officials have become increasingly reluctant to isolate Iran diplomatically due to investment in Iranian oil and gas. With the latest intelligence indicating it will be at least a year before Iran has sufficient nuclear material to construct a weapon, Washington is in no rush to anger Russia and China whilst a diplomatic solution may still be found.

Washington's refusal to consider a military strike also stems from Israel's close relationship with the United States; that is to say any action taken by Israel would be perceived as having Washington's support. Consequently, Iranian retaliation against US interests is likely in the event of an Israeli strike. To this end, Iran could attempt to sow instability in Iraq through its influence amongst the Shi-ite population, or move to provide insurgents in Afghanistan with funding and training. Worse still, it could opt to release nuclear information to less-than-desirable end users (President Ahmadinejad recently announced that Iran aspires to export nuclear technology). At a time when US-Israeli relations are already strained, it is unlikely Israel would wish to defy its staunchest ally over such a critical issue.

Outside the United States, many other nations have spoken out against an Israeli attack on Iran. In the last week, both the French Prime Minister Nicolas Sarkozy and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev have stated that any attack on Iran would result in catastrophe for the region. To this end, Russia has delayed the delivery of an advanced air defence system to Iran, apparently due to "technical difficulties." Many analysts have interpreted these "technical difficulties" as a political move, as the system in question (S-300) would dramatically enhance Iran's air defence network, making it less vulnerable to an Israeli strike. Along with increased

range and accuracy over any of Iran's existing air defence systems, the S-300 can intercept ballistic missiles – a capability Iran currently lacks. Consequently, Russian delivery of the S-300 system would likely force Israel's hand, as once in place it would dramatically reduce the chance of a successful strike.

However, the continued delay in the delivery of the S-300 system has encouraged Iran to develop its own air defence capability; namely the new Mersad system announced on 11th April. The Mersad is based on the US HAWK system from the 1970's, and whilst several improvements have been made to the radar and electronic counter-measures suite, it remains a point defence system with limited range that will not unduly worry the Israeli Air Force.

Despite the continued weakness of Iran's air defence network, several factors prevent the likelihood of a successful Israeli strike. Iran's nuclear establishments are more numerous and dispersed than those of Iraq and Syria, where only one compound was attacked. They are also better defended, with most installations being many metres under the ground and protected by reinforced concrete barriers. This limits the utility of conventional munitions, which cannot penetrate far enough into the earth to disable the facilities. Tactical nuclear warheads would be another option, but it is unlikely Israel would opt to use these having repeatedly stated that it will not be the first state to introduce such weapons to the Middle East. The only remaining option is to use "bunker busting" munitions – that is weapons specifically designed to penetrate metres of earth and concrete before detonating. Israel retains a limited supply of such weapons from a deal with the United States in 2005, although a recent bid for more advanced munitions was denied by the Obama administration. With these older and smaller "bunker busters", the level of accuracy required to disable Iran's highly protected facilities makes a successful strike far from certain.

Consequently, multiple strikes would be needed to ensure sufficient weapons delivery on target. However given the flight path from Israel to Iran, the Israeli Air Force would have difficulty in pursuing anything more elaborate than a one-off sortie. One way around this may be to use ballistic missiles, which Iran currently has no defence against. However this approach also runs into problems, as the level of accuracy required to disable Iran's facilities with conventional munitions cannot be guaranteed by Israel's current Jericho ballistic missile system.

Supposing however that these obstacles were overcome, it is difficult to gauge how long a successful strike could delay Iran's nuclear weapon program. Cordesman and Toukan, in their report analysing the effects of an Israeli strike, estimated that Iran's nuclear program could be set back roughly one year by using conventional weaponry. The use of tactical nuclear weapons would produce better results, setting the programme back roughly 4-5 years.

Assuming that Israel would not use nuclear weapons (as it continually insists), it is unlikely that a one-year delay to the Iranian nuclear program could be justified in the face of the substantial political and military repercussions that would result. Iran would likely respond to any aggression by directly attacking Israel with ballistic missiles, whilst simultaneously prompting Hamas and Hezbollah into action along Israel's borders and within its population centres. A minor set back to the Iranian nuclear programme would not be worth the substantial loss of life and potential for military escalation that would come from such a strike.

Given this situation, Israel is likely to bide its time. The opportunity still exists for non-military engagement with Tehran; it will be at least a year before Iran can generate weapons grade nuclear material, and its air defence network shows little sign of improvement. The window of opportunity for an air strike will therefore remain open for the foreseeable future. Consequently rather than striking from an isolated position, it would be more prudent for Israel to give the Washington space it needs to push for greater sanctions and apply more pressure on Tehran. Should this fail to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions Israel will have lost nothing, but may find itself with more support for military action in the future.

Matthew Smith recently graduated from Kings College London with an MA in War Studies, having studied International Relations at the University of Reading