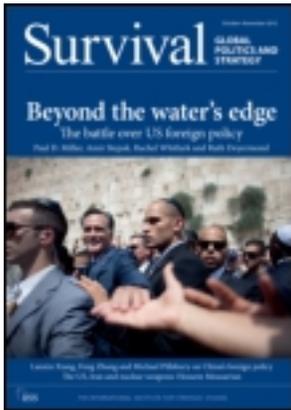


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Striking Iran: The Debate in Israel

Charles D. Freilich

In recent months Israel's political and defence leaders have engaged in an unprecedented and vociferous public debate about Iran's nuclear programme, and about the advisability of an Israeli strike to destroy or delay it. Meir Dagan, the former head of the secret intelligence service Mossad, called an Israeli attack, at this time, 'the stupidest thing I have ever heard of', warned that it might ignite a regional war and stated that there was still a window of some three years, while the former head of the internal security agency Shin Bet, Yuval Diskin, stated that he did 'not trust' Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's and Defense Minister Ehud Barak's 'messianic' leadership.¹ The former chief of staff (2007–11) of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Gabi Ashkenazi, has been more restrained, but has made clear his opposition to an operation at this time, and even the current chief of staff, bound by the strictures of his office, has let it be known that he is not enthusiastic.

President Shimon Peres, usually a model of discretion, has gone beyond the highly circumscribed limits of what is normally considered appropriate to his largely ceremonial position and come out publicly against an operation, stating that Israel should rely on US President Barack Obama's public commitment to a policy of containment. Kadima Party leader Shaul Mofaz has joined the fray, becoming the first senior political figure to adopt a partisan position, averring that an attack at this time is premature and that Netanyahu is 'speculating' with Israel's security.

Chuck Freilich is a Senior Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School, and a former Israeli Deputy National Security Adviser. He is the author of *Zion's Dilemmas: How Israel Makes National Security Policy* (Cornell University Press, 2012).

Within the crucially important 'Octet', the informal cabinet committee in which most sensitive policy deliberation takes place, opinion is divided, with two deputy prime ministers, Dan Meridor and the usually more hawkish Moshe Yaalon, as well as Minister without Portfolio Benny Begin leading the opposition to an attack. According to some reports, Netanyahu recently ceased convening the forum on Iran, due to the ongoing divide. Within the Ministerial Committee on Defense (MCoD), opinion also still appears to be divided. The MCoD has not to date been the primary locus of decision-making on this issue, but will likely be where the final decision is made. (By law, approval must be given either by the MCoD or the cabinet plenum.) Netanyahu may already have a small majority in favour in the committee and will in all likelihood succeed in mustering one when the time comes.

In August, Netanyahu and Barak began making a strong public case in a variety of media appearances and public forums for an attack, and preparing the public for the possible consequences. Given the likelihood of a severe response by Iran and particularly by Hizbullah, preparation of the public is an essential step prior to an attack, and its absence had been telling. In the meantime, both Netanyahu, in his address to the General Assembly, and Barak in other forums, have moderated their positions and backed off from an imminent strike, indicating that an attack is not in the offing before late spring or summer 2013.

Although the unusual public nature and stridency of the debate struck many around the world, it is still hard for those abroad to understand how great the effect on the Israeli public has been. The Iranian nuclear programme had been the one consensual issue in an otherwise politically frenetic and deeply divided country and was dealt with, so the public believed, in a manner appropriate to the severity of the threat. In 2011–12, however, Israel's news media have been rife with conflicting and at times apocalyptic declarations from commentators and various senior officials, former and current, while newspaper headlines have blared the latest developments and TV news have been full of reports about the controversy. The ongoing distribution of gas masks to the population spiked in August 2012 after years in which the public showed desultory interest at best, with most

people simply too blasé to bother to go to the distribution centres. The talk of the street, Friday night social gatherings, indeed virtually all discussions, came to focus on the Iranian issue and the possibility of an attack.

With the prime minister and defence minister making a strong case of their own, supported by some defence officials, commentators and political allies, the public was clearly confused. So, undoubtedly, were foreign governments and observers, the question being whether Israel intended to attack in the foreseeable future (or at all), whether it might even do so prior to the American elections in November, and what the ramifications of such an operation would be, both in terms of actual damage to the Iranian programme and the political and military fallout. Some believe that Netanyahu and Barak did not really intend to act, but to galvanise further international action against Iran, in the form of heightened sanctions, and to induce Obama to make a more explicit statement of his determination to prevent Iran from going nuclear, including his willingness to use military force should this ultimately prove necessary and the 'red lines' which might precipitate such action.

*The public
was confused*

Be that as it may, the debate raises a number of questions with regard to Israel's national-security decision-making processes. One question already deeply debated in Israel is whether the public discussion has harmed Israel's interests, and especially its deterrent posture. The picture is mixed. Even the harshest critics of the premier and defence minister have been careful to avoid any statements regarding Israel's operational plans and capabilities, focusing their criticism on the question of whether an attack should be conducted at all, and on the likely consequences. While some have expressed doubts regarding Israel's ability to cause a long-term delay in the Iranian programme and whether a few years' postponement would be worth the cost, this merely reflects the generally accepted wisdom among analysts in Israel and abroad and has been echoed publicly by senior American and other officials. True, Tehran could take heart from a confirmation by Israeli officials, but any sober assessment of the situation leads to a similar conclusion and, from a strictly operational point of view, it can be argued that these public statements have not caused any damage.

More fundamentally, however, the exposure of the deep divide within the Israeli political and defence leadership has been inimical to Israel's deterrent posture. Whether they ultimately intend to attack or not, Netanyahu and Barak have been quite successful in using the implied threat of Israeli action to press the international community to increase pressure on Iran. Indeed, the unprecedented international sanctions now in place may stem as much from a desire to avoid the fallout from Israeli action as from substantive opposition to the Iranian programme. Public expressions of opposition clearly undermine Netanyahu and Barak's ability to present a united front to the international community, expose Israel to pressure not to attack and send a counterproductive message of indecisiveness to Iran.

At the same time, it is clear that the final decision is in the hands of the premier and defence minister, not their opponents, that they appear to be

*Their
credibility is
on the line*

determined to act in the not-too-distant future, and that the IDF and other defence organs will carry out the orders without hesitation, whatever doubts senior officials may personally harbour. Israel's overall level of deterrence may not actually have been harmed significantly. Aside from the value of debating important, even historic, decisions in a democracy, the ferocity of the debate may serve to rein-

force Iranian concerns that Israel will ultimately act. Indications that this is the case can be found in Iranian statements, even when they disdainfully discount the possibility of an Israeli attack and warn Israel of the dire consequences of such action. Moreover, Netanyahu and Barak may have boxed themselves into a corner, so that their credibility is on the line. While this may not determine the precise timing of an attack, their public statements may, in the absence of a major new American initiative or breakthrough in negotiations with Iran, ultimately bind them to act.

Many in Israel and abroad have nevertheless been dismayed by this unprecedented and unseemly public debate. For many, it is a new low in what has always been a politically charged, messy and leak-prone decision-making process, bordering on the irresponsible, endangering Israeli and possibly American interests and even raising questions regarding senior

officials' legal (and certainly ethical) obligations once out of office. Others believe it is a healthy sign of a vibrant democracy in which even the most sensitive issues can be debated publicly and in which senior defence officials courageously uphold a moral duty, or a sense of higher calling, and bring their concerns to the public's knowledge.

Some of the public statements are deeply disturbing and, if they are not in breach of legal obligations, certainly violate the professional code defence officials are sworn to uphold except in extenuating circumstances. Those who violate this code bear the moral responsibility to show that they were indeed acting out of a higher calling, lest a highly dangerous precedent be set. Illustrious careers notwithstanding, the burden of proof is on them.

Israeli national-security decision-making processes derive from three primary factors: the extraordinarily difficult Middle Eastern environment in which Israel operates and which shapes, at times dictates, many of its actions; the nature of its highly febrile proportional representation electoral system, which colours every important decision-making process; and the weak decision-making capabilities and political and bureaucratic stature of the primary civilian national-security organs (the foreign and defense ministries and the National Security Staff), compared to the defence establishment.² These causal factors lead to five primary pathologies in the Israeli decision-making process.

An unplanned process

The process of policy formulation at the cabinet level generally, and particularly the formulation of objectives and options, is deficient, and there is a pronounced tendency to improvisational and sequential decision-making. Examples abound: decisions regarding Lebanon in recent decades (including the 1982 invasion, unilateral withdrawal in 2000 and war in 2006); the 2005 unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and the 2009 military operation there; the lead-up to the Camp David summit and the peace treaty with Egypt in 1978–1979; and various later stages of the peace process. Even the Six-Day War, Israel's greatest military success, was the result of operational brilliance despite the absence of a systematic formulation of strategic objectives prior to the outbreak of war.

To be sure, the Iranian case is different: extensive policy planning has been conducted for nearly two decades. Every relevant part of the national-security establishment, including the IDF, Mossad, Foreign Ministry, Atomic Energy Commission and National Security Staff (previously the National Security Council), has been deeply involved, if not overwhelmingly preoccupied, with the Iranian issue. Mossad was named head of an inter-agency coordinating committee, and endless background and policy papers have been prepared that analyse in detail both the information available and the pros and cons of every possible course of action. The cabinet, at least at the level of the Octet, though not the plenum or even the MCoD, has also conducted extensive and in-depth deliberations on the issue. Extensive exchanges have taken place with the United States and other governments.

Indeed, it is hard to think of many examples from Israeli history in which the policy-planning process has been as long, in-depth and carefully thought out. Even the opposition to an attack from within the national-security establishment reflects the depth of the consideration given the issue.

A highly politicised process

In Israel, partisan politics and considerations of coalition maintenance, rather than substantive policy, reign supreme, over and above the normally accepted levels in Western democracies. Public opinion, moreover, has a major influence on policy. In a nation in which everything is fiercely debated in a chaotic rough-and-tumble, no-holds-barred political game, the decision-making process on the Iranian nuclear issue was, for nearly two decades, a rare case of consensual and unpoliticised policy planning conducted almost entirely behind the scenes, within the apolitical and professional confines of the national-security establishment and among a small number of senior political leaders.

In the last year, however, after the issue burst onto the public stage, the divisions within the national-security establishment and the cabinet have been exposed for all to see. With few exceptions, however, the debate has not been a partisan political one, but has been based solely on substantive policy differences. Dagan and Diskin did not attack Netanyahu and Barak for partisan reasons, and the three leading opponents within the Octet

(Meridor, Yaalon and Begin) are members of Likud, reasonably close to Netanyahu and relatively straight shooters. Even Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, not typically known for discreet and carefully nuanced views, is reported to have been quite balanced on this issue. In August 2012 Shaul Mofaz emerged as the first high-profile partisan critic, but this was over a year after the public controversy began. For the most part, then, the issue has not been politicised in a partisan sense and the future of the Netanyahu government does not hinge on the decision whether or not to attack Iran.

The Octet is the latest in Israel's long tradition of informal and non-binding kitchen cabinets that premiers convene to discuss highly sensitive issues expeditiously and discreetly, and to build broader cabinet support for preferred policies. Although the Octet has no statutory basis and cannot make decisions, its members include some of the most senior or respected ministers and the policy options it favours typically carry great weight in both the MCoD and cabinet plenum, the two statutory decision-making forums. Netanyahu and Barak have thus sought to muster as much support as possible in the Octet, and failure to get majority backing would make obtaining the approval of one of the two decision-making bodies that much harder. It is widely believed that Netanyahu recently appointed Avi Dichter as a ninth member of the forum, because of his supposedly more favourable stance on an attack, and in so doing may have tipped the balance in the new Nonet.

For reasons of both operational secrecy and political expediency, final authorisation of an attack will probably be given in the MCoD. This has usually been the practice in the past, even in cases of decisions to go to war, though some have argued that a decision of such momentous importance should be made by the cabinet plenum. Even with the recommendation of the new Nonet, support for an attack in the MCoD or plenum will not be automatic, though there are no indications that the coalition's component parties are divided on this issue by any significant partisan differences. Here, too, as in the Octet/Nonet, the policy debate on this issue can be expected to be overwhelmingly substantive, not partisan.

Although the Iranian nuclear programme had been one of the main focuses of Israeli national-security discourse for the last two decades and

had been covered extensively in the media, policy debate was generally confined to the national-security establishment and the public was largely a passive, if concerned, spectator. With the explosion of the debate onto the public stage, and as the possibility of military action has become more imminent, the public has become intensively engaged. Repeated opinion polls show an informed and cautious public, deeply aware of and concerned by the potential Iranian threat, but which greatly prefers a diplomatic resolution to the issue and recognises both the limitations and dangers inherent in an Israeli strike, as well as the need for American support regardless of what Israel decides to do. Whereas polling showed that only 23% of the public were in favour of an attack in March 2012, this had grown to 32% by August, while opposition decreased from 56% to 46%. American support for the attack, or lack thereof, was a decisive factor for a majority of those polled.³ Given the broad recognition of the severity and complexity of the threat, it is unlikely that public opinion will be channelled into concrete political action, or that it would significantly affect the senior leadership's decisions, though some high-profile individuals and lobbying groups have already begun expressing their views.

In short, the Iranian issue is a rare case, in Israel's highly frenetic political system, in which the decision-making process is not marked by a significant degree of politicisation.

Semi-organised anarchy

Israel often appears to be an unruly and even anarchic conglomerate of embattled factions, rather than a unified state actor. There are three primary reasons: the weakness of the premier's formal authority and prerogatives, the dysfunctionality of the cabinet as a decision-making body and the endless leaks. One wag has even gone so far as to aver that the very term 'State of Israel' is an oxymoron, in that anarchy cannot be a state.

Be that as it may, the Israeli premier's formal authority and prerogatives are, indeed, highly circumscribed. The premier is neither the commander-in-chief nor the chief executive, as in the United States, cannot order the IDF into action on his sole recognisance and can make virtually no decisions, even in the field of national security, without the approval of the cabinet

or the MCoD (the sole exceptions are responses to terrorist attacks or other limited situations requiring immediate action). The premier's true sources of authority are the stature of his office, the ability to set the cabinet agenda and, most importantly, his clout and skill in playing the political game and building political support for preferred policies. In these circumstances, some Israeli premiers have been highly effective and even audacious leaders, when they enjoyed firm control of their parties and coalitions, whereas others have been comparatively weak, at the mercy of the contending forces within their coalitions.

The cabinet plenum has long been a dysfunctional decision-making forum, because of its size (it now numbers an unwieldy 30 ministers, precluding any possibility of in-depth, expeditious and discreet decision-making), the fundamentally partisan nature of its deliberations (raucous political debates would be a better term), and the fact that it leaks endlessly, to the extent that it has almost become an open forum. The ostensible solution to the cabinet's deficiencies, the MCoD, has also become too large. Under the law, the MCoD can number up to half the size of the cabinet plenum, giving it an unworkable current membership of 15, and it has proven almost as leak-prone as the plenum.

Unsurprisingly, these semi-anarchic characteristics increasingly appear to be operating in the Iran case. While Netanyahu will likely prove ultimately successful in building a majority in the MCoD in favour of an attack, he has nevertheless encountered ongoing opposition in the Octet, and is reported to have ceased convening it in recent months, despite his otherwise firm control of his party and coalition. The cabinet plenum and even the MCoD have largely been eclipsed in the decision-making process. Netanyahu is legally bound to present the final decision to one of them (in all likelihood the MCoD) for approval, but he will presumably do as most of his predecessors have done and simply try to ram a decision through. The cabinet or MCoD will probably be merely the formal locus of decision-making, not the substantive one. The prime minister, defence minister and a handful of senior officials and trusted ministers will be the ones who truly decide.

If leaks were for a long time not a problem in the Iranian case, they have certainly become one now. Whether the breakdown in confidentiality on the

political-strategic level spills over into the operational, and how this could affect the future conduct of Israeli policy, remains unknown. Despite the cabinet's well-deserved reputation for leaking, this has rarely extended to operational matters, though there have been some exceptions, for example during the Lebanon war in 2006.

An uninstitutionalised process

Idiosyncratic decision-making generally plays a role in Israel above and beyond that typical of other democracies; there is a partial disconnect between policy inputs and policy formulation, and policy coordination and integration are deficient. In the case of Iran, however, Israel has conducted a careful and painstaking decision-making process, at all levels of the national-security establishment, for nearly two decades. Until recently the debate was narrowly focused, but highly significant. One school of thought, which could be called the 'existentialist' approach, views a nuclear Iran as an absolutely existential threat to the State of Israel and thus holds that Israel must do everything possible to prevent it from materialising. The second 'moderate' approach views a nuclear Iran as a 'dire' threat, but probably not an existential one, and thus holds that Israel should do everything within reason, not everything possible, to prevent it. According to this approach, Israel can, given a lack of a better alternative, live with a nuclear Iran.

The recent public debate reflects this ongoing conceptual divide. The broad agreement that Iran does present, at a bare minimum, a dire threat, had bridged the divide between the two schools of thought and served as a basis for consensual decision-making. No one disputed the need for Israel to do what it could, within reason, to prevent Iranian nuclearisation and to prepare for all eventualities. As a result, the decision-making process was not substantively related to the idiosyncratic preferences of a particular individual.

With the imminence of military action this changed, and the debate came to be cast as Netanyahu and Barak versus the defence establishment and some senior political leaders. Netanyahu clearly views the threats through the prism of the Holocaust, repeatedly making reference to 1938 as a basis for comparison and understanding of the issue, and is firmly

committed, on a very personal level, to preventing a renewed threat to the existence of the Jewish people. In Barak's case there appears to be less emotional baggage, but his apparent determination to impose his views on an unenthusiastic defence establishment lends an idiosyncratic dimension to his role as well.

From the outside it is difficult to judge whether the decision-making process on Iran suffers, as in many other cases in Israeli history, from a disconnect between policy inputs and outputs and from insufficient coordination and integration of policy. Clearly those who have come out so strongly against an attack believe this to be the case, and think that the direction apparently favoured by Netanyahu and Barak is not consistent with the information available regarding Israel's ability to attain its objectives. While many of the opponents of military action have not completely ruled out the use of force at a later date, and virtually all would probably favour military action if they thought that Israel could achieve a sufficient postponement of the Iranian programme at an acceptable cost, the elements of the decision simply do not add up for them. In opposing a strike, they view Iran as too large a challenge for Israel and prefer to leave it to the United States, at least for now.

The final decision whether or not to attack, while deeply rooted in the information available, is ultimately a subjective judgement call, in which there is no one right answer. The Iranian case is simply too big, and its ramifications for Israel so momentous, that different leaders and officials can legitimately look at the same data and reach diametrically different conclusions for substantive policy and normative reasons, not because there was a faulty decision-making process.

History is replete with cases of 'good' decision-making processes that led to bad outcomes and of 'bad' processes that nonetheless ended up with positive results. Menachem Begin's deeply flawed decision-making process during the negotiations with Egypt in the late 1970s produced a highly favourable outcome, whereas the effective decision-making process conducted by Barak during the negotiations with the Palestinians, leading up to and following the Camp David Summit in 2000, ultimately resulted in a dismal failure. In the case of the Iranian nuclear programme, the process has been good, but how the final decision will pan out is unknowable.

The primacy of the defence establishment

The defence establishment (mostly the IDF and intelligence agencies) has long been the primary source of expertise and policy planning available to Israeli decision-makers and has been the most influential bureaucratic player in the decision-making process. As such, it has played a dominant role in all three stages of the policy cycle: situational assessment through Military Intelligence (MI), the leading intelligence agency in Israel; policy planning through the IDF Planning Branch, which remains by far the pre-eminent strategic-planning body 13 years after the establishment of the National Security Staff; and through policy implementation, which will be conducted by the IDF if a strike is approved. Given the weight of the defence establishment in the overall decision-making process, the positions of the defence minister or IDF typically prevail. The highly developed policy assessment, formulation and implementation capabilities of the defence establishment are not a pathology but a national asset, a sphere of excellence. It is the weakness of the civilian agencies, first and foremost the Foreign Ministry and National Security Staff, that is the problem.

Although we do not have a definitive understanding of the internal dynamics of the decision-making process over Iran, or of the roles played by the different agencies, MI and Mossad are the primary sources of information on the Iranian nuclear programme, though the Foreign Ministry has also played an important role. While Mossad was given the lead in the inter-agency decision-making process and has presumably been involved in strategic as well as operational planning, the Israeli Air Force and the IDF Planning and Operations Branches will play crucial roles in advising the senior leadership on the feasibility and presumed consequences of an attack. Should one be carried out, it will of course be led by the IDF. The Foreign Ministry has rarely been an important player in policy formulation in the past, and by all accounts it is not now on Iran. It is unclear what influence the National Security Staff has on this issue.

More important, however, is the extent to which the positions of the defence minister and IDF will ultimately prevail. In the past, there has been a broad degree of overlap, even identity, in their policy preferences, though there have also been cases in which the defence minister and the

IDF held differing views and where the minister has imposed his will in the face of strenuous disagreement. In the Iran case, two questions arise: the extent to which the reported differences between senior officers and the defence minister are truly substantive and whether the more aggressive policy reportedly favoured by the defence minister and premier, at least until recently, ultimately prevails. Conducting an attack over IDF opposition would certainly entail far greater political risks for the premier and defence minister.

* * *

The decision-making process in the case of Iran's nuclear programme appears to be detailed, painstaking and well thought out. The five pathologies typical of Israeli national-security decision-making have only partially manifested in this instance. The process has been planned, objectives and options have been weighed carefully; this has not been a case of improvisational or sequential decision-making, nor has there been significant politicisation. As for the generally semi-anarchic nature of the process, on this issue the premier does appear to have been in charge, though the dysfunctional nature of the cabinet and the problem of leaks have been apparent. The uninstitutionalised nature of the process has only partially manifested. There are certainly dimensions of idiosyncratic decision-making, but no definitive information substantiates a policy disconnect or failure of policy coordination and integration. The defence establishment has been the primary source of expertise and the leading bureaucratic player, as would be expected, but it is unclear whether the defence minister's preferences or the IDF's opposition to an attack, at least at this stage, will prevail.

Whatever Netanyahu and Barak decide, it cannot be denied that they face an extraordinarily difficult decision, in which Israel's future may be at stake and which entails great political, diplomatic and economic risk. Neither wants to go down in history as the leader who allowed a new existential threat to the Jewish people to materialise. But they are between a rock and a hard place; they will be judged harshly by history regardless of what course they choose.

Notes

- ¹ Yossi Melman, 'Former Mossad Chief: Israel Air Strike on Iran "Stupidest Thing I Have Ever Heard"', *Haaretz*, 7 May 2011; Yaakov Lappin, 'Former Shin Bet Chief Slams "Messianic" PM, Barak', *Jerusalem Post*, 29 April 2012.
- ² See Charles D. Freilich, *Zion's Dilemmas: How Israel Makes National Security Policy* (Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012) and Charles D. Freilich, 'National Security Decision-Making in Israel: Processes, Pathologies and Strengths', *Middle East Journal*, vol. 60, no. 4, Autumn 2006, pp. 635–63.
- ³ Udi Segal, Channel 2 News, 23 February 2012, <http://mako.co.il/news-military/security/Article-7582273c16ba531018.htm>; IDF Radio, 20 August 2012, <http://glz.co.il/news-Article.aspx?newsid=111305>.