I am not engaging in a thought exercise, or a one-man war game, when I discuss the plausibility and potential consequences of an Israeli strike on Iran. Israel has twice before successfully attacked and destroyed an enemy’s nuclear program. In 1981, Israeli warplanes bombed the Iraqi reactor at Tuqayr, halting forever, as it turned out, Saddam Hussein’s nuclear ambitions; and in 2007, Israeli planes destroyed a nuclear reactor being built in north Korea’s built reactor in Syria. An attack on Iran, then, would be unprecedented only in scope and complexity. I have been exploring the possibility that such a strike will eventually occur for more than seven years. [In the months since then, I have interviewed roughly 40 current and past Israeli decision makers about a military strike, as well as many American and Arab officials. In most of these interviews, I have come away with the impression that there is a significant chance that Israel will launch a strike by next July.] But I tested the consensus by speaking to multiple sources both in and out of government, and of different political parties. Citing the extraordinary sensitivity of the subject, most spoke only reluctantly, and on condition of anonymity. The reasoning of Israeli decision makers was unexceptional: Iran is, at most, one to three years away from having a breakout nuclear capability, and the most crucial component of Israeli national-security doctrine, a tenet that dates back to the 1960s, is that no regional adversary should be allowed to achieve nuclear parity with the reborn and still-hisged Jewish state.

In our conversation before his swearing-in, Netanyahu would not frame the issue in terms of nuclear parity. [Instead, he framed the Iranian program as a threat not only to Israel but to all of West ern civilization.] When the wide-eyed believer gets hold of the reins of power and the weapons of mass death, then the world should start worrying, and that’s what is happening in Iran.

In our conversation, Netanyahu refused to discuss his timetable for action, or even whether he was considering military preemption of the Iranian nuclear program. [Netanyahu’s belief is that Iran is not Israel’s problem alone; it is the world’s problem, and the world, led by the United States, is duty bound to grapple with it. But Netanyahu does not place great faith in sanctions not the relatively weak sanctions against Iran recently passed by the United Nations Security Council, nor the more rigorous military options that he finds the prospect of a nuclear Iran “unacceptable,” will attack the Iranian nuclear program in the near future? Not everyone would answer this question, but a consensus emerged that there is a better than 50 percent chance that Israel will launch a strike by next July. But I tested the consensus by speaking to multiple sources both in and out of government, and of different political parties. Citing the extraordinary sensitivity of the subject, most spoke only reluctantly, and on condition of anonymity. The reasoning of Israeli decision makers was unexceptional: Iran is, at most, one to three years away from having a breakout nuclear capability, and the most crucial component of Israeli national-security doctrine, a tenet that dates back to the 1960s, is that no regional adversary should be allowed to achieve nuclear parity with the reborn and still-hisged Jewish state.

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Barack Obama has said any nuclear Iran would be a game-changing situation, not just in the Middle East, but around the world.

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

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

“Bush was two years ago, but the Iranian program was the same and the intent was the same,” the Israeli official told me. “So don’t personally expect Obama to be more Bush than Bush.”

If the Israelis reach the firm conclusion that Obama will not, under any circumstances, launch a strike on Iran, then the countdown will begin for a unilateral Israeli attack.

A strike on Iran, Israeli intelligence officials believe, could provoke all-out retaliation by Iran’s allies.

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