

# Expert

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Lebanese subsidiary, Hezbollah, which now possesses, by most intelligence estimates, as many as 45,000 rockets—at least three times as many as it had in the summer of 2006, during the last round of fighting between the group and Israel.)

“Netanyahu is not unique in his understanding of this challenge; several of the prime ministers who preceded him cast Iran’s threat in similarly existential terms. [...] He has a deep sense of his role in Jewish history,” Michael Oren, Israel’s ambassador to the United States, told me.”

Jeffrey Goldberg goes on for several pages to tell the story of Netanyahu’s father, Ben-Zion, whom he considers to be the most outstanding historian in the world on the subject of the Spanish Inquisition and other important merits, and who recently celebrated his 100th birthday.

“Benjamin Netanyahu is not known in most quarters for his pliability on matters concerning Palestinians, though he has been trying lately to meet at least some of Barack Obama’s demands that he move the peace process forward.”

At the end of this part of his article, Goldberg carries on with the analysis of the complex situation. At times he is rather tough analyzing a 2001 commentary by the former president of Iran, Hashemi-Rafsanjani, in which he is certainly speaking about a bomb that would destroy Israel; a threat that was criticized even by the left-wing forces that are Netanyahu’s enemies.

“The challenges posed by a nuclear Iran are more subtle than a direct attack, Netanyahu told me. [...] Iran’s militant proxies would be able to fire rockets and engage in other terror activities while enjoying a nuclear umbrella. [...] Instead of being a local event, however painful, it becomes a global one. Second, this development would embolden Islamic militants far and wide, on many continents, who would believe that this is a providential sign, that this fanaticism is on the ultimate road to triumph.”

“You’d create a great sea change in the balance of power in our area,” he went on.

“Other Israeli leaders believe that the mere threat of a nuclear attack by Iran—combined with the chronic menacing of Israel’s cities by the rocket forces of Hamas and Hezbollah—will progressively undermine the country’s ability to retain its most creative and productive citizens. [...] The real test for us is to make Israel such an attractive place, such a cutting-edge place in human society, education, culture, science, quality of life, that even American Jewish young people want to come here.”

“Patriotism in Israel runs very high, according to numerous polls, and it seemed unlikely to me that mere fear of Iran could drive Israel’s Jews to seek shelter elsewhere. But one leading proponent of an Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities, Ephraim Sneh, a former general and former deputy defense minister, is convinced that if Iran crossed the nuclear threshold, the very idea of Israel would be endangered. “These people are good citizens, and brave citizens, but the dynamics of life are such that if someone has a scholarship for two years at an American university

and the university offers him a third year, the parents will say, ‘Go ahead, remain there.’” Sneh told me when I met with him in his office outside of Tel Aviv not long ago. “If someone finishes a Ph.D. and they are offered a job in America, they might stay there. It will not be that people are running to the airport. [...] The bottom line is that we would have an accelerated brain drain. And an Israel that is not based on entrepreneurship, that is not based on excellence, will not be the Israel of today.”

“One Monday evening in early summer, I sat in the office of the decidedly non-goyishe Rahm Emanuel, the White House chief of staff, and listened to several National Security Council officials he had gathered at his conference table explain—in so many words—why the Jewish state should trust the non-Jewish president of the United States to stop Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold. “

“One of those at the table, Ben Rhodes, a deputy national-security adviser who served as the lead author of the recent “National Security Strategy for the United States” as well as of the president’s conciliatory Cairo speech, suggested that Iran’s nuclear program was a clear threat to American security, and that the Obama administration responds to national-security threats in the manner of other administrations. “We are coordinating a multifaceted strategy to increase pressure on Iran, but that doesn’t mean we’ve removed any option from the table,” Rhodes said. “This president has shown again and again that when he believes it is necessary to use force to protect American national-security interests, he has done so. We’re not going to address hypotheticals about when and if we would use military force, but I think we’ve made it clear that we aren’t removing the option of force from any situation in which our national security is affected.”

“Emanuel, whose default state is exasperation [...] (A former Bush administration official told me that his president faced the opposite problem: Bush, bogged down by two wars and believing that Iran wasn’t that close to crossing the nuclear threshold, opposed the use of force against Iran’s program, and made his view clear, “but no one believed him).”

“At one point, I put forward the idea that for abundantly obvious reasons, few people would believe Barack Obama would open up a third front in the greater Middle East. One of the officials responded heatedly, “What have we done that would allow you to reach the conclusion that we think that a nuclear Iran would represent a tolerable situation?”

“Obama administration officials, particularly in the Pentagon, have several times signaled unhappiness at the possibility of military preemption. In April, the undersecretary of defense for policy, Michele Flournoy, told reporters that military force against Iran was “off the table in the near term.” She later backtracked, but Admiral Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has also criticized the idea of attacking Iran. [...] In an area that’s so unstable right now, we just don’t need more of that.”

“President Obama has by no means ruled out counterproliferation by force. [...] Gary Samore, the National Security Council official who oversees the administration’s



Iranian Army

counterproliferation agenda, told me that the Israelis agree with American assessments that Iran’s uranium-enrichment program is plagued with problems.”

“We can measure, based on the IAEA reports, that the Iranians are not doing well,” Samore said. “The particular centrifuge machines they’re running are based on an inferior technology. They are running into some technical difficulties, partly because of the work we’ve done to deny them access to foreign components. When they make the parts themselves, they are making parts that don’t have quality control.”

“Dennis Ross, the former Middle East peace negotiator who is currently a senior National Security Council official, said during the meeting that he believes the Israelis now understand that American-instigated measures have slowed Iran’s progress, and that the administration is working to convince the Israelis—and other parties in the region—that the sanctions strategy “has a chance of working.”

“The president has said he hasn’t taken any options off the table, but let’s take a look at why we think this strategy could work.” [...] Last June, when they hadn’t responded to our bilateral outreach, the president said that we would take stock by September.”

“Ross [...] the sanctions Iran now faces may affect the regime’s thinking. “The sanctions are going to cut across the board. They are taking place in the context of Iranian mismanagement—the Iranians are going to have to cut [food and fuel] subsidies; they already have public alienation; they have division in the elites, and between the elites and the rest of the country.”

“One question no administration official seems eager to answer is this: what will the United States do if sanctions fail? Several Arab officials complained to me that the Obama administration has not communicated its intentions to them, even generally.”

“Obama’s voters like it when the administration shows that it doesn’t want to fight Iran, but this is not a domestic political issue,” the foreign minister said. “Iran will continue on this reckless path, unless the administration starts to speak unreasonably. The best way to avoid striking Iran is to make Iran think that the U.S. is about to strike Iran. We have to know the president’s intentions on this matter. We are his allies.” (According to two administration sources, this issue caused tension between President Obama and his recently dismissed director of national intelligence, Admiral Dennis Blair. According to these sources, Blair, who was said to put great emphasis on the Iranian threat, told the president

ments have pursued a peace process.”

“Israel should consider carefully whether a military strike would be worth the trouble it would unleash. “I’m not sure that given the time line, whatever the time line is, that whatever they did, they wouldn’t stop” the nuclear program, he said. “They would be postponing.”

“It was then that I realized that, on some subjects, the Israelis and Americans are still talking past each other.”

“IN MY CONVERSATIONS with former Israeli air-force generals and strategists, the prevalent tone was cautious. Many people I interviewed were ready, on condition of anonymity, to say why an attack on Iran’s nuclear sites would be difficult for Israel. And some Israeli generals, like their American colleagues, questioned the very idea of an attack. “Our time would be better spent lobbying Barack Obama to do this, rather than trying this ourselves,” one general told me. “We are very good at this kind of operation, but it is a big stretch for us. The Americans can do this with a minimum of difficulty, by comparison. This is too big for us.”

“These planes would have to return home quickly, in part because Israeli intelligence believes that Iran would immediately order Hezbollah to fire rockets at Israeli cities, and Israeli air-force resources would be needed to hunt Hezbollah rocket teams.”

“In the event of a unilateral Israeli strike on Iran, his mission would be to combat Hezbollah rocket forces. [...] to keep Hezbollah in reserve until Iran can cross the nuclear threshold.

“Hezbollah “lost a lot of his men. [...] That is one reason we have had four years of quiet. What has changed in four years is that Hezbollah has increased its missile capability, but we have increased our capabilities as well.” He concluded by saying, in reference to a potential Israeli strike on Iran, “Our readiness means that Israel has freedom of action.”

“America, too, would look complicit in an Israeli attack, even if it had not been forewarned. The assumption—often, but not always, correct—that Israel acts only with the approval of the United States is a feature of life in the Middle East, and it is one the Israelis say they are taking into account. I spoke with several Israeli officials who are grappling with this question, among others: what if American intelligence learns about Israeli intentions hours before the scheduled launch of an attack? “It is a nightmare for us,” one of these officials told me. “What if President Obama calls up Bibi and says, ‘We know what you’re doing. Stop immediately.’ Do we stop? We might have to. A decision has been made that we can’t lie to the Americans about our plans. We don’t want to inform them beforehand. This is for their sake and for ours. So what do we do? These are the hard questions.”

“Many Israelis think the Iranians are building Auschwitz. We have to let them know that we have destroyed Auschwitz, or we have to let them know that we tried and failed.”

“There are, of course, Israeli leaders who believe that attacking Iran is too risky. [...] We don’t want politicians to put us in a bad position because of the word Shoah,” one general said.”

“After staring at the photograph of the Israeli air-force flyover of Auschwitz more than a dozen dif-

ferent times in more than a dozen different offices, I came to see the contradiction at its core. If the Jewish physicists who created Israel’s nuclear arsenal could somehow have ripped a hole in the space-time continuum and sent a squadron of fighters back to 1942...”

“Benjamin Netanyahu feels, for reasons of national security, that if sanctions fail, he will be forced to take action. But an Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities, successful or not, may cause Iran to redouble its efforts—this time with a measure of international sympathy—to create a nuclear arsenal. And it could cause chaos for America in the Middle East. [...] Peres sees the Iranian nuclear program as potentially catastrophic. [...] When I asked if he believed in a military option, he said, “Why should I declare something like that?”

“Based on months of interviews, I have come to believe that the administration knows it is a near-certainty that Israel will act against Iran soon if nothing or no one else stops the nuclear program; [...] Earlier this year, I agreed with those, including many Israelis, Arabs—and Iranians—who believe there is no chance that Obama would ever resort to force to stop Iran; I still don’t believe there is a great chance he will take military action in the near future—for one thing, the Pentagon is notably unenthusiastic about the idea. But Obama is clearly seized by the issue. [...] Denis McDonough, the chief of staff of the National Security Council, told me, “What you see in Iran is the intersection of a number of leading priorities of the president, who sees a serious threat to the global nonproliferation regime, a threat of cascading nuclear activities in a volatile region, and a threat to a close friend of the United States, Israel. I think you see the several streams coming together, which accounts for why it is so important to us.”

“When I asked Peres what he thought of Netanyahu’s effort to make Israel’s case to the Obama administration, he responded [...] this country should know its place, and that it was up to the American president, and only the American president, to decide in the end how best to safeguard the future of the West. The story was about his mentor, David Ben-Gurion.

“Shortly after John F. Kennedy was elected president, Ben-Gurion met him at the Waldorf Astoria” in New York, Peres told me. “After the meeting, Kennedy accompanied Ben-Gurion to the elevator and said, ‘Mr. Prime Minister, I want to tell you, I was elected because of your people, so what can I do for you in return?’

Ben-Gurion was insulted by the question. He said, ‘What you can do is be a great president of the United States. You must understand that to have a great president of the United States is a great event.’”

“Peres went on to explain what he saw as Israel’s true interest. “We don’t want to win over the president,” he said. “We want the president to win.”

“Jeffrey Goldberg”  
“Jeffrey Mark Goldberg is an American-Israeli journalist. He is one of the writers and staff journalists on The Atlantic journal. Previously he worked for The New Yorker. Goldberg mainly writes on international subjects, preferring the Middle East and Africa. Some have called him the most influential journalist-blogger on matters dealing with Israel.