



Why an Israeli Military Option against Iran Is Back on the Table

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The most important message to come out of last week's United Nations General Assembly gathering in New York wasn't Africa's call for greater vaccine diplomacy, or a plea for the world body to get more engaged in Myanmar. Rather, it was that Israel, now under new management by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and his broad political coalition, is making serious contingency plans to move unilaterally against Iran, should it become necessary to do so.

In his September 28 address before the U.N. General Assembly, Israel's new premier made it clear that the Jewish state continues to view the Islamic Republic's persistent nuclear ambitions as a truly existential danger — and that it is prepared to take military action on its own in order to thwart them if it feels it has no other choice.

Such a step, it should be noted, has never been Israel's preference. Israeli policymakers have long maintained that diplomacy and multilateral pressure — or, barring that, collective action — are preferable methods for containing Iran's nuclear progress. This is so for obvious reasons. After some two decades of development, Iran's atomic enterprise is simply too vast, too distributed, and too complex to be eliminated outright by a targeted strike. That is why, on the rare occasions that they do speak of action against Iran, Israeli strategic planners make clear that the best they hope for is to cause temporary setbacks and complications to Tehran's path toward the bomb.

Nevertheless, they are also acutely aware of the fact that Iran's nuclear program isn't standing still. Back in August, Israeli defense minister Benny Gantz warned publicly that the Iranian regime could be as little as ten weeks away from “nuclear breakout” — that is, acquiring the weapons-grade material necessary to assemble an atomic weapon. In his remarks in New York last week, Bennett echoed this essential point. “Over the past few years, Iran has made a major leap forward, in its nuclear R&D, in its production-capacity, and in its enrichment,” he said. “Iran's nuclear weapon program is at a critical point.” In other words, as seen from Jerusalem, Iran's nuclear clock is ticking loudly indeed.

Moreover, Tehran appears to believe that time is on its side. In the heyday of the Trump administration's “maximum pressure” campaign, concerted U.S. pressure on Iranian energy clients had succeeded in decimating the Islamic Republic's oil exports, driving them below 200,000 barrels of oil a day and wreaking havoc on the country's energy-dependent economy in the process. Today, the opposite dynamic is taking shape. The advent of the Biden administration brought with it a rollback of “maximum pressure” and a relaxation of enforcement of secondary U.S. sanctions against Iran's trading partners. Predictably, this has resulted in a surge of new business for the Iranian regime. For instance, by themselves, Chinese oil imports from Iran now stand at nearly 600,00 barrels daily (while U.S. concerns over the need to secure Beijing's cooperation on issues such as climate change has prevented Washington from moving forcefully to curtail them). This and other such expanded business has helped put Iran's ayatollahs — as well as their nuclear project — on a much firmer financial footing.

The consequences could be nothing short of catastrophic. Iran's nuclear program, Bennett made clear, “has hit a watershed moment.” Dealing with it will require more than open-ended diplomacy on the part of the United States and the international community. If the Islamic Republic isn't prepared for compromise, it must incur consequences for its intransigence.

“There are those in the world who seem to view Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons as an inevitable reality, as a done deal — or they've just become tired of hearing about it,” Bennett concluded. “Israel doesn't have that privilege. We will not tire. We will not allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon.”

The resulting message from Israel's top leadership could not be any clearer: It is prepared to act to prevent a nuclear Iran. If it ends up doing so, it will be because the United States and its international partners did not take Iran's nuclear program, or Israel's concerns, seriously enough.