

## **The Shot Not Yet Heard 'Round the World**

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The censuring of Iran by the United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on 27 November shines the world spotlight on the Islamic Republic's nuclear program once again. Later that day, the former Israeli ambassador to the UN, Dan Gillerman expressed satisfaction with the move, but also argued that it had come very late in the game. Gillerman went on to explain that there were two clocks in play, the diplomatic clock, and the clock counting down to a nuclear-armed Iran. The former ambassador had no doubt that the latter was moving more quickly.

Expectations that Israel will strike Iranian nuclear facilities remain common. A poll in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* from April 2009 showed that 66% percent of Israelis approve of military action against Iran. An article in the *Jerusalem Post* from 3 September insisted in no uncertain terms that the time had come for Israelis to act before Iran develops nuclear weapons and threatens a second Holocaust. How realistic is such an attack by Israel? More importantly, what would it mean if it happened?

On one level, it is easy to imagine Israeli air-strikes designed to destroy, or at least slow, Iran's nuclear development. Israel undertook precisely the same sort of action in 2007, destroying a North-Korean built nuclear reactor in the Syrian desert. More famously, in June 1981 fourteen Israeli F-16s, specially modified for the operation, flew over Saudi Arabia and into Iraq where they succeeded in inflicting heavy damage on the French-built Osirak reactor. They were back in Israel before the Iraqi air force could respond. International condemnation rained down on Tel Aviv, but soon subsided. Iraq, already engaged in its massive eight-year war with Iran, was unable to respond aggressively.

The apparent success of these operations should not blind us to the reality that a similar attack on Iran would involve far greater difficulties. Iran today is not Iraq in 1981. The regime in Tehran is not distracted by another major conflict; it would be able to strike back against Israel directly using mid-range ballistic missiles with conventional warheads; it could also encourage Hizbollah to launch attacks from Lebanon. Iran has a sophisticated air-defense system utilizing new technologies from powerful trading partners. As opposed to the single Iraqi reactor, there are several known Iranian nuclear sites.

Reports from within Israel are that the IAF has once again prepared a group of specially modified attack aircraft that will have the capacity to strike targets in Iran. An unconfirmed press leak suggested that the Israeli government approached the Bush administration in its final days for approval to use Iraqi airspace and that permission had been denied.

The strike, however, may not come through an air operation modeled on 'Operation Opera'. Israel is also a more powerful today than in 1981. The Israeli navy has a number of missile warships as well as several submarines which are capable of launching missiles and could, in the last resort, arm them with nuclear warheads. The type of strike necessary to neutralize Iran's nuclear ambitions would undoubtedly combine a sea-to-land launch with an air assault and would be the most significant combat operation by Israel since the 1973 war.

The hard-fought war in 1973, coming only six years after Israel's famous six-day triumph, scarred many Israelis. Israel's victory was only achieved at great cost, and land was returned to Egypt as part of the subsequent peace agreement. The 1973 war also had an economic cost. During the war, OPEC slashed production and sent the price of oil skyrocketing. An oil embargo was launched against nations which supported Israel, particularly the United States. In combination with the 1973-74 stock market crash, the oil crisis caused major pain in the world financial system.

The global effects of a conflict in 2009 or 2010 would be just as severe if not greater than those in 1973. If it chooses to attack Iran, Israel can expect a conflict as difficult and costly as the war in 1973. The world can expect another energy crisis in tandem with a major stock market crash. In combination with the financial problems already confronting the world's economies, the effects could be disastrous. Israel's leaders undoubtedly understand the magnitude of the challenge confronting them. For this reason, it is logical to assume that they will remain prudent regarding the direct use of force against Iran. European leaders currently partnering with the United States in an attempt to find a solution to the Iranian nuclear issue understand these realities, as does the United States.

If Israeli, European, and American leaders understand this reality, Iranian leaders do as well. They expect that the application of any punitive military measures to limit their nuclear capabilities is simply too costly to be attempted. With the credibility of the threat of force in question, Western leverage is slipping away and with it, the hope of preventing a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.