

OPINION and ANALYSIS

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**A selection of some of the more challenging and thought-provoking
local and international writings on the Middle East**

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Don't bet against Israel on Iran

Dan Ephron, The Daily Beast, 24 February 2012

<http://news.yahoo.com/don-t-bet-against-israel-iran-033011537.html>

Israeli officials are pushing back against what appears to be a growing perception among experts and analysts that its military lacks the capability to deal a significant blow to Iran's nuclear installations, warning skeptics not to underestimate the Jewish state.

The officials, including currently serving political figures and retired military officers, pointed out in interviews with The Daily Beast that Israel has a history of surprising its

enemies and surpassing expectations, from the lightning assault of the 1967 war to the daring rescue operation for hostages at Entebbe in 1976.

Their remarks seemed calculated to counter reports like the one in The New York Times last week that suggested Israeli planes would face huge challenges in reaching Iran and destroying its nuclear installations, which are buried deep in the ground and scattered throughout the country.

But even as the officials sought to cast doubt about the assessments, they were unlikely to dispel the suspicion that Israel might be deliberately overstating its capabilities in order to prod the United States and other powers to deepen economic sanctions against Iran and, if necessary, launch their own military action to stop Tehran's uranium enrichment.

"These reports don't tell the whole story," said one senior official who, like all the others, asked not be identified discussing Iran. "If we need to do it [attack Iran's nuclear facilities], believe me, there are enough ways."

Others echoed the remarks, including a retired senior officer who said: "People take us seriously because we have a record in these things. Nobody should doubt us."

Israel has been warning for years that Iran is developing nuclear weapons capability, a claim that was largely substantiated by an International Atomic Energy Agency report last November. Tension over the Iranian program has risen dramatically in recent months, with Israeli leaders repeatedly vowing to prevent Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold by whatever means necessary.

The United States takes the threat seriously. Fearing an Israeli attack would set the Middle East ablaze and tilt the world economy back toward an economic recession, President Obama has dispatched to Jerusalem a series of high-ranking officials to pressure Israel to give the latest round of sanctions – including an oil embargo and measures against Iran's central bank—a chance to work.

Obama is expected to press the point personally with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu when the two men meet in Washington next month.

But a growing number of analysts, including Israelis, are now saying openly that Israel's warnings are at least partly a disinformation campaign.

The skeptics include Martin van Creveld, Israel's preeminent military historian and theorist, who said in an interview that Israel could do some damage to the Iranian program but could not knock it out.

"I would not be surprised if there was a strong element of political theater" to the Israeli threats, he said.

Barry Rubin, an Israeli expert on terrorism and international affairs, described the notion that Israel would attack Iran as "an absurd idea" and concluded: "It isn't going to happen."

“So why are Israelis talking about a potential attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities? Because that’s a good way—indeed, the only way Israel has—to pressure Western countries to work harder on the issue, to increase sanctions and diplomatic efforts,” Rubin wrote on Pajamas Media.

The officials who spoke to The Daily Beast said the doubters weren’t seeing the whole picture. One alluded to advanced technology that Israel possesses that could not be factored into the analysis of experts because it remains secret. Others said some skepticism—from analysts or even from government insiders—always preceded Israel’s major operations, including its 1981 attack on Iraq’s nuclear plant.

One former Israeli official, speaking to a group of journalists recently, also rejected the idea that Iran’s response to an Israeli attack would upend the region.

“My assessment is that Iran will react but it will be calculated and according to Iranian means. The Iranians cannot set the Middle East on fire,” the former official said. “It will not be the doomsday promises of Iran... They do not have the capability to do what they threaten to do.”

Asked if Israel has the capability to deal a serious blow to Iran’s program, he said: “If not, why is everybody worried?”

The Return of the Israel Apartheid Week cult

Jonathan Kay, National Post, 25 February 2012

<http://fullcomment.nationalpost.com/2012/02/25/jonathan-kay-the-return-of-the-israel-apartheid-week-cult/>

In Syria, the Assad regime continues to rain artillery on rebel positions in the city of Homs, killing journalists and innocent civilians alike. Iran’s mullahs are set to execute a Canadian citizen for the crime of operating a web site they don’t like. The new Libyan regime is torturing Gaddafi loyalists. And Egypt’s rulers are prosecuting NGO leaders on trumped-up charges. And so next week, Canadian left-wing activists will congregate in Toronto to express their hatred of ... you guessed it: Israel.

The events of March 5-9 will take place as part of the 8th annual Israel Apartheid Week (IAW), and will feature presentations such as “Cutting the Ties to Israeli Apartheid: Cultural and Academic Boycott,” and “Rhymes Of Resistance And The Sounds Of Existence — with poets Remi Kanazi, Red Slam and Chand-nee.” The IAW website is full of the usual rhetoric about Israel’s “criminal” actions. There is not a word of acknowledgement about how utterly ridiculous it is to run a week-long event vilifying Israel when right next door in Syria, the government has just exterminated more Arabs than were killed in both Intifidas, the 2008 Gaza conflict, and the 2006 Lebanon war combined.

The timing of IAW this year truly does represent something of a farce. The eyes of the entire world are focused on Syria and the Strait of Hormuz. Even West Bank Palestinians themselves now seem more concerned with building up their economy than with grand international gestures aimed at the Jewish state. And in the “occupied” Golan Heights, Druze Muslims have been stirring — not against Israel, but against the Assad regime that many once looked to for “liberation.” In the streets of Cairo, Sana’a and Tunis, no one is talking about Israel — only about when they will get the democracy they were promised. Only among cultish, single-minded anti-Israel activists has the news of the Arab Spring failed to circulate.

The word “cultish” is used here advisedly — because even some veteran anti-Israel activists are getting tired of the false mantras that circulate at IAW events. This includes no less an anti-Zionist than Norman Finkelstein (who has called Israel a “vandal state” that “relentlessly and brutally and inhumanly keeps these vicious, murderous wars”). Speaking to an interviewer earlier this month, he attacked the animating philosophy behind IAW — the movement for boycotts, divestment and sanctions against Israel (BDS) — as a “cult,” and an unsuccessful one at that.

National Post editorial writers have attended BDS events here in Toronto, and they all contain the same rousing assurances that the BDS movement will bring Israel to its knees. The self-consciously enforced spirit of *viva la revolución* solidarity that permeates these rallies reminds one of communist rallies in the days before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Year after year, we hear the same clichés about how the BDS movement is on the cusp of victory. Yet the Israeli economy continues to prosper, and the only groups that have fallen into line with the boycott call are scattered NGOs and low-tier universities. “All [the BDS] claims about ‘victories’ [against Israel]: These 10 fingers more than suffice to count their victories,” Mr. Finkelstein said this month. “It’s a cult. The guru says: ‘We have all these victories,’ and everyone nods their head.”

Of greater concern to Mr. Finkelstein, a former university professor and the author of many controversial books, is the sheer dishonesty that permeates the BDS movement.

“We have to be honest: They [BDS activists] don’t want Israel. They think they’re being clever. They call it their three tiers. ‘We want to end of the occupation,’ ‘We want the right of return [for Palestinian refugees],’ ‘And we want equal rights for Arab citizens.’ But they know the result of implementing all three is — what? You and I both know: There’s no Israel. [If you ask them about it, they say] ‘Oh we’re agnostic about Israel.’ No. You’re not agnostic. You don’t want it [to exist].”

In fairness to the IAW activists who will be assembling on campuses in coming days, not all of them seek the outright destruction of Israel — though many certainly do. Some are merely naive undergraduates who truly do believe in two secure, peaceful states living side by side. Others are bored veterans of other activist movements, such as anti-racism and gay rights, looking to the Middle East to recapture the sense of moral purpose once provided by the (successful) fight against discrimination here in Canada.

But all of them should understand that IAW and BDS are not what they seem: As some of Israel’s own fiercest critics themselves now admit, these are dishonest cults meant to enlist ill-informed activists in a campaign to destroy the Jewish state.

Iran's relentless nuclear quest

John Bolton, The Washington Times, 22 February 2012

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/feb/22/irans-relentless-nuclear-quest/>

The Valentine's Day announcement of new scientific and technological achievements in Iran's nuclear program demonstrates the continued broadening and deepening of its capacities in this sensitive, dangerous field. While the race to achieve functional nuclear weapons is the most mesmerizing and immediately threatening aspect of Iran's work, its continued march across the full scope of nuclear activities shows that Tehran is confident it will not soon be thwarted.

Iran is in for the long haul, belying the fancy that diplomacy or economic sanctions can work. The confirmation that the Fordo uranium-enrichment facility near Qom is fully operational and that its first domestically manufactured fuel rods are installed in the Tehran Research Reactor shows Iran steadily mastering the nuclear-fuel cycle. Perhaps we will next hear that the Arak heavy-water production facility is completed and functioning and that the nearby heavy-water reactor will, in fact, be inaugurated in 2013. Or that Iran's ballistic-missile program has launch-tested vehicles capable of reaching targets in the Western Hemisphere.

Each successive step underscores that Iran's carefully planned, systematic and increasingly operational nuclear infrastructure is not designed simply to show defiance of Western opposition and sanctions, as some contend. Remember, for example, the flurry of optimism about proposals to exchange Iran's existing supply of low-enriched uranium so that a foreign nation could manufacture fuel rods for the Tehran reactor. Iran swatted away that initiative, not least because manufacturing fuel rods domestically always was part of its larger strategy to widen and intensify its nuclear capability.

Iran's slow and steady progress for two decades has demonstrated beyond frantic rhetorical efforts at denial that diplomacy has not only been futile, but has provided Iran political cover and legitimacy while it pursued its nuclear objectives. Even more important, negotiations and the imposition of weak, ineffective sanctions have given Iran time to reach the point where its nuclear activities are broad and deep, and it is close to winning the strategically important race to the nuclear-weapons finish line. President Obama's own Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper testified to the Senate in January that "the sanctions as imposed so far have not caused [the Iranians] to change their behavior or their policy." Public assertions and actions by China, India, Turkey and others make clear that new financial and oil-related sanctions also will come essentially to naught.

This ongoing failure also demonstrates why the notion, still dominant in Europe and the Obama administration, that Iran can be trusted with a "peaceful" nuclear program if it renounces weapons capabilities is delusional and dangerous. There is no way to comprehensively monitor covert nuclear activities by a nation determined to hide them, as North Korea unfortunately has proved. For decades, Iran has lied about its objectives, obstructed international inspectors and flouted its supposedly solemn treaty obligations against pursuing nuclear weapons, all the while supporting international terrorism.

Plainly, therefore, to all but the most naive, the Tehran regime is not to be trusted with sharp objects, let alone nuclear weapons.

The sedate pace of Iran's nuclear program demonstrates its lack of concern for U.S. military action. Indeed, so confident is Tehran that it not only has conspired to kill the Saudi ambassador to Washington on our own soil, but has been busily targeting Israeli diplomats in terrorist attacks and giving Europe a taste of its own medicine by cutting off oil supplies even before new European Union sanctions take effect. Sadly for America, Iran's progress represents a bipartisan foreign-policy failure, extending over three successive administrations. The Obama administration's only real distinction, embarrassing though it is, is to have carried Clinton and George W. Bush administration mistakes to their ultimate conclusion. Mr. Obama could well be remembered in history as the president asleep in the wheelhouse when Iran actually achieved both nuclear weapons and a fully indigenous nuclear fuel cycle.

Only one question remains. However sanguine Iran is about U.S. inattention, neither Tehran nor Washington really knows what Israel will decide to do militarily. The window for such action has been closing for years, and Israel may have waited too long. Given the size and growth of Iran's program and the notorious inadequacy of our intelligence in that country, there is much we don't know, and none of it can be good. Accordingly, even a successful Israeli strike could now be insufficient to halt Iran's program for an extended period. And certainly, Iran has more than enough strategic warning to prepare its defenses.

Those in the White House who fear an Israeli attack more than Iranian nuclear weapons may prevail. But a world where Iran has nuclear weapons (and, inevitably therefore, so will others nearby) will be far more dangerous than a world after an Israeli military strike.

Peculiar proliferation of Palestine refugees

Daniel Pipes, The Washington Times, 20 February 2012

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/feb/20/peculiar-proliferation-of-palestine-refugees/>

Of all the issues that drive the Arab-Israeli conflict, none is more central, malign, primal, enduring, emotional and complex than the status of those people known as Palestine refugees. The origins of this unique case, notes Nitza Nachmias of Tel Aviv University, goes back to Count Folke Bernadotte, the United Nations Security Council's mediator. Referring to those Arabs who fled the British mandate of Palestine, he argued in 1948 that the U.N. had a "responsibility for their relief" because it was a U.N. decision - the establishment of Israel - that had made them refugees. However inaccurate his view, it still remains alive and potent and helps explain why the U.N. devotes unique attention to Palestine refugees pending their own state.

True to Bernadotte's legacy, the U.N. set up a range of special institutions exclusively for Palestine refugees. Of these, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), founded in 1949, stands out as the most important. It is both the only refugee organization to deal with a specific people (the United Nations High

Commission for Refugees takes care of all non-Palestinian refugees) and the largest U.N. organization in terms of staff.

UNRWA seemingly defines its wards with great specificity: "Palestine refugees are people whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948, who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict." The ranks of these refugees (who initially included some Jews) have, of course, much diminished over the past 64 years. Accepting UNRWA's (exaggerated) number of 750,000 original Palestine refugees, only a fraction of that number, about 150,000, remain alive.

UNRWA's staff has taken three major steps over the years to expand the definition of Palestine refugees. First, and contrary to universal practice, it continued the refugee status of those who became citizens of an Arab state (Jordan in particular). Second, it made a little-noticed decision in 1965 that extended the definition of "Palestine refugee" to the descendants of those refugees who are male, a shift that permits Palestine refugees uniquely to pass their refugee status on to subsequent generations. The U.S. government, the agency's largest donor, only mildly protested this momentous change. The U.N. General Assembly endorsed it in 1982, so now the definition of a Palestine refugee officially includes "descendants of Palestine refugee males, including legally adopted children." Third, UNRWA in 1967 added refugees from the Six-Day War to its rolls; today they constitute about a fifth of the Palestine refugee total.

These changes had dramatic results. In contrast to all other refugee populations, which diminish in number as people settle down or die, the Palestine refugee population has grown over time. UNRWA acknowledges this bizarre phenomenon: "When the agency started working in 1950, it was responding to the needs of about 750,000 Palestine refugees. Today, 5 million Palestine refugees are eligible for UNRWA services." Further, according to James G. Lindsay, former UNRWA general counsel, under UNRWA's definition, that 5 million figure represents only half of those potentially eligible for Palestine refugee status.

In other words, rather than diminish five-fold over six decades, UNRWA has the population of refugees increase almost sevenfold. That number could grow faster yet due to the growing sentiment that female refugees should also pass on their refugee status. Even when, in about 40 years, the last actual refugee from mandatory Palestine dies, pseudo-refugees will continue to proliferate. Thus is the "Palestine refugee" status set to swell indefinitely. Put differently, as Steven J. Rosen of the Middle East Forum notes, "given UNRWA's standards, eventually all humans will be Palestine refugees."

Were the Palestine refugee status a healthy one, this infinite expansion would hardly matter. But the status has destructive implications for two parties - Israel, which suffers from the depredations of a category of people whose lives are truncated and distorted by an impossible dream of return to their great-grandparents' houses; and the "refugees" themselves, whose status implies a culture of dependency, grievance, rage and futility.

All other refugees from the World War II era (including my own parents) have been long settled. The Palestine refugee status already has endured too long and needs to be narrowed down to actual refugees before it does further damage.

NOTE: The views expressed in certain articles are not necessarily those of the SAZF

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