

IRAN AND THE EUROPEAN PREDICAMENT

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INTRODUCTION

In the run-up to the American presidential elections of November 2008 both candidates have spoken repeatedly about the Iranian nuclear danger. In an interview with a *Fox* reporter Barack Obama said: 'Iran is a major threat; I would never hesitate to use our military force in order to protect homeland, US interests.'¹ Obama indicated that he would be prepared to direct talks with the Iranian leaders, but considered 'any action against them legitimate, if they show no willingness to change their nuclear policy.' He also said that he would make the Iranian nuclear issue 'a top priority for him as president.'² His opponent, John McCain, was against direct negotiations, and was even more than Obama in favour of military measures if Iran does not change its course. Most famously he has claimed that 'the only thing worse than a war with Iran would be a nuclear Iran.'³

Such warnings do not fall on fertile soil in the European Union. It is true that the Iranian nuclear programme has been a permanent point on the European diplomatic agenda since 2003, but most European politicians would rather not prefer to formulate the danger in the wording of US leaders. In the EU it is not a real foreign policy priority. The issue is largely absent in the media and the public debate. Other major conflicts in the Middle East, Afghanistan, or the Caucasus, humanitarian and natural disasters in the world, climate change, or the financial crisis are considered much more important. Barack Obama was undoubtedly the favourite candidate among broad segments of the European population, but his foreign policy priorities were not really understood or appreciated.

¹ Quoted by NetNews.com (9 May 2008).

² *Haaretz* (31 July 2008).

³ See Richard Holbrooke, 'The next president: mastering a daunting agenda', 87 *Foreign Affairs*, No. 5 (September/October 2008) p. 16.

The purpose of this chapter is to slightly redress this European misjudgment, and to push the Iranian nuclear danger more into the heart of the European foreign policy debate. What are the risks of the Iranian nuclear activities? What are the principal options left for the international community and the EU? We shall argue that Israel in particular has much reason to worry, and the EU should become more aware of a possible Israeli preventive strike.

EARLY EU INVOLVEMENT

Although today the dangers of Iran's nuclear programme are less salient in Europe than in the United States or Israel, it was surprisingly the EU that, five years ago, opened the negotiations with the Iranian authorities about this matter. In October 2003, the French, British and German Ministers of Foreign Affairs (the EU3) went to Tehran, and signed a document in which the Iranian government agreed to suspend its nuclear enrichment activities.⁴ Tehran also agreed to sign the Additional Protocol of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). For the EU a nice windfall after the frustrating European discord over Iraq earlier that year.⁵ Now Europe could show the world a bit more unity and the benefits of civilian instruments over saber rattling. Shortly before, the EU had already presented its views on non-proliferation and in December 2003 it even launched its own 'security strategy'.

With their involvement in the Iranian nuclear *imbroglio* the EU assumed a sharper foreign policy profile, also by using openly the EU3 formula as the best way forward in a Union of 25 and more member states. The High Representative of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Javier Solana, would gradually become the principal coordinator for the talks with Iran, also on behalf of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P6 or '3 + 3 group'). Washington refused direct negotiations with a regime it had not recognized since the Islamic revolution of 1979, and it was also fully preoccupied by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁶ But from the beginning the Bush administration urged for sanctions by the Security Council, and has exerted constant pressure on the European diplomatic efforts in this regard.

⁴ This programme, revealed in 2002 by an Iranian resistance group, had been kept hidden during twenty years from inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and was largely illegal under the rules of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

⁵ Initially, the EU3 did not officially speak for all EU member states. This changed when in 2004 the High Representative of the CFSP, Javier Solana, became associated with the talks on behalf of the EU. See Tom Sauer, *Coercive Diplomacy by the EU: the Case of Iran*, Discussion Papers Diplomacy (The Hague, Clingendael Institute 2007).

⁶ Recently, however, Washington has shifted its position in this regard. William Burns, Under-Secretary for Political Affairs at the State Department, was present at the Geneva summit of the P6 and Iran on 19 July 2008.

The hour of Europe, however, was only granted a short life. Tehran revoked the agreement with the EU3 as early as June 2004 and resumed the construction for uranium conversion and probably also its enrichment activities.⁷ In Paris, later that year, the EU3 convinced the Iranian government again to comply with the regulations of the NPT. However, this agreement was immediately nullified after the election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in August 2005, who made it clear that Iran would never give up the right to fully control the nuclear fuel cycle.⁸ The Additional Protocol, with its stronger provisions for inspections and safeguards, was not ratified. This despite the fact that even the United States held out the prospect of economic incentives, such as the supply of spare parts for the aging Iranian airlines, and Iran's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). In September 2005 the board of governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) concluded that Iran no longer complied with the rules of the NPT. In February 2006 the case was brought to the UN Security Council, which has adopted three resolutions since that time, imposing a number of economic and financial sanctions against Iran.⁹ EU diplomacy has undoubtedly contributed to foster a significant multilateral coalition against Iran, with Russia and China on board for (not too strong) economic sanctions, and it has perhaps prevented Washington from taking risky unilateral steps, but the main purpose, to stop Iran's illegal nuclear programme, has not been achieved.

THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR CAPACITY

On the contrary. Iran has used the past years to considerably expand its nuclear installations and today it most likely has the capacity to enrich uranium to a weapons-grade level without any further technical, material, or personnel assistance from abroad. The Iranian government denies categorically that it has this military ambition. For years on end it has argued that its nuclear efforts are exclusively meant for civilian energy. But few people believe this. The mere size of the complexes in Isfahan and Natanz, for instance, can only be explained from the perspective of military objectives. Their capacity for uranium enrichment and related processing activities is far above the necessary scale for the peaceful application of nuclear energy, quite apart from the argument that Iran already possesses the largest reservoirs of oil and gas in the world. The heavy

⁷ Emily B. Landau & Ephraim Asculi, 'Iran's Nuclear Program and Negotiations with the EU3', 8 *Strategic Assessment* (Tel Aviv), No. 3 (November 2005).

⁸ *Disarmament Diplomacy*, No. 80 (August 2005).

⁹ SC Res. 1737 in December 2006, SC Res. 1747 in March 2007, and SC Res. 1803 in March 2008. Cf. Dick Leurdijk, *De Veiligheidsraad en de nucleaire programma's van Noord-Korea en Iran* (The Hague, Clingendael Institute 2007).

water reactor in Arak is constructed for the production of plutonium, fuel only needed for nuclear weapons. For a strictly civilian nuclear programme Iran might very well manage with fuel provided by Russia or the EU, as has been suggested by the EU on a couple of occasions. Despite its proclaimed need for nuclear energy and many years of work, Iran has, apart from the reactor in Bushehr, failed to develop a single nuclear power plant for the generation of electricity. If the Iranian programme were indeed that peaceful, there would, of course, be no need to conceal it from IAEA inspections for a period of twenty years. Tehran is on record for repeated violations of the NPT rules; it has breached the agreements with the EU3, and since 2006 it has defied, and continues to defy, the binding sanctions of the Security Council under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

The latest periodic report of the IAEA Director General, Mohamed ElBaradei, on the implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement by Iran, published in September 2008, gives reason for serious alarm.¹⁰ According to Israeli experts Iran has 'stepped up both the rate of uranium enrichment and the development of more advanced types of gas centrifuges that in turn would increase the rate of enrichment further. If all goes well for Iran, it would be able to amass a sufficient quantity of low-enriched uranium to enable it to further enrich it and produce a quantity of military grade uranium by the turn of the decade, sufficient for the production of a single nuclear explosive device.'¹¹ A few months earlier ElBaradei had already warned that 'in a period of six months up to one year' Iran might be able to produce a nuclear explosive.¹²

Many analysts and officials take a similar view.¹³ It is true that the celebrated 2007 'National Intelligence Estimate' (NIE) of the joint American intelligence services concluded that Iran stopped building nuclear weapons in the autumn of 2003, but this does not detract from the fact that its current nuclear efforts could irrevocably lead to a nuclear weapons potential once again. Just a few months are needed for the conversion of low-enriched uranium into weapons-grade uranium.¹⁴ With a sufficient amount of high-enriched uranium, combined with a suitable detonator, the actual manufacturing of a nuclear weapon may be quickly

¹⁰ *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), and 1803 (2008) in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Vienna, IAEA board of governors, GOV/2008/38, 15 September 2008.

¹¹ Ephraim Asculai, *The Latest IAEA Report on Iran and the Options Facing the International Community*, Tel Aviv, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), *INSS Insight*, No. 73 (22 September 2008).

¹² MEMRI, Special Dispatch Series No. 1967 (23 June 2008).

¹³ See for a survey: Daan de Wit, *De volgende oorlog. De aanval op Iran: een voorbeschouwing* (Rotterdam, Lemniscaat 2008).

¹⁴ 'Iran's nuclear program', New York, Council of Foreign Relations (online) (17 July 2008).

realized. The NIE 2007 report judges that ‘with moderate confidence Iran probably would be technically capable of producing enough high-enriched uranium for a weapon sometime during the 2010 – 2015 time frame.’¹⁵ The Director of the National Intelligence Council in Washington DC, Michael McConnell, has in his Annual Threat Assessment of February 2008 supplemented this concern by pointing to the growing missile capability of Iran.¹⁶

Israeli experts share these assessments, and it is not hard to imagine that they remain rather on the pessimistic side of the estimates.¹⁷ There is a broad consensus among leading Israeli politicians like former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Defence Minister Ehud Barak, or the new leader of the Kadima party (and possibly the next prime minister), Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, that Iran will very soon be able to produce nuclear weapons. In their view the point of no return will be reached by 2010.¹⁸ Thereafter, the actual production of weapons is only a matter of time. ‘It is a race against time and time is winning,’ declared deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz on a visit to Washington DC in August 2008.¹⁹

Delivery vehicles like the mid-range *Shahab-3* ballistic missiles (i.e., for targets in the Middle East) have already been developed. These are partly based on Russian technology, and not very advanced or precise, but they certainly do work, as Saddam Hussein famously showed during the Gulf War in 1991. With similar renovated Russian *Scud* missiles (though without a charge of mass destruction) he was able to hit nearly forty targets in Israel. Provided with a nuclear warhead, such missiles do not need to be very precise to have catastrophic consequences. The widely mediatized launch of the three-stage *Safir* rocket on 17 August 2008 above northern Iran was probably a failure, but it indicates that the Iranian space programme is rapidly speeding up.²⁰

THE RISKS OF AN IRANIAN NUCLEAR WEAPON

The security implications of an Iranian nuclear weapon are well known. All states in the Middle East and around the Gulf are widely exposed to the risks.

¹⁵ Quoted by Eich Follath, Cordula Meyer & Christoph Schult, ‘Intelligence Agencies put brakes on Bush’s Iran Plans’, *Der Spiegel* (online) (12 October 2007).

¹⁶ De Wit, *supra* n. 13, p. 45.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Ephraim Kam, ed., *Israel and a Nuclear Iran: Implications for Arms Control, Deterrence, and Defense*, Tel Aviv, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Memorandum No. 94 (July 2008). Cf. Yossi Melman & Meir Javedanfar, *The Nuclear Sphinx of Tehran. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the State of Iran* (New York, Carroll & Graf Publishers 2007) pp. 151–170.

¹⁸ Cf. the CNN interview by Wolf Blitzer with Tzipi Livni on 3 August 2008, available on <www.mfa.gov.il>

¹⁹ ‘Israel warns on Iran nuclear arms’, *BBC News* (2 August 2008).

²⁰ See Michael Persson, ‘Een pruttelende V-2 uit Iran’, *De Volkskrant* (23 August 2008).

Iran would become the undisputed hegemon of the region, and its nuclear status might very well encourage Egypt and Saudi Arabia to develop their own nuclear arms. That would be a fatal blow to the NPT. Iranian missiles could easily hit the many American bases and troops in the region, or aggravate local crises in Lebanon and the Gaza strip. Nuclear material can also be maliciously turned over to terrorist organizations. It is not inconceivable that nuclear explosives might be assembled at secret locations in Egypt or Lebanon, to be subsequently transported in container trucks into Israel. In the United States, both the White House and the Congress have declared on many occasions that an Iranian nuclear weapon is 'unacceptable', and that to prevent this perspective 'not a single option' should be excluded. This viewpoint is shared by the two presidential candidates, as we have seen. Yet an Iranian nuclear weapon does not in itself pose a direct threat to the American homeland given, among other things, the insufficient range of the Iranian missiles. The EU, too, considers an Iranian nuclear weapon to be unacceptable, and for France in particular it has already been a more or less open point of concern in its defence policy for a number of years, the White Paper of 2008 included. 'Iran' was also the initial argument to set up American anti-missile shields in Poland and the Czech Republic. But the EU as such sees the Iranian nuclear dossier primarily as a diplomatic issue, not as a military one.

For Israel the situation is entirely different. Here an Iranian nuclear arsenal is widely perceived as an existential threat. Just one hit by a nuclear loaded *Shahab-3* near Tel Aviv would cause hundreds of thousands of victims and massive destruction. President Ahmadinejad has repeatedly called for the annihilation of the Zionist entity, or suggested that the Jewish state should be wiped from the face of the earth, or removed from the 'pages of history'.²¹ Other Iranian leaders have joined this chorus, and calls for the fight against the Jews are a standard feature in the Friday sermons of the Iranian clergy. This is combined with the denial of the Holocaust and other flagrant forms of anti-Semitism. In the Iranian media the Protocols of the Elders of Zion are often seen as serious proof of the Jewish conspiracy for world domination.²² Moreover, Tehran puts deeds into words, and openly provides terrorist movements such as Hamas, Hezbollah or the Islamic Jihad with advanced weaponry and instructors, as was shown, for instance, during the Lebanon war in July 2006. Not surprisingly, Jerusalem considers Iran as a bigger threat to the security of Israel than the Palestinians.

The persistent Iranian nuclear efforts leave the international community essentially with three sets of options.

²¹ Melman & Javedanfar, *supra* n. 17, p. 53.

²² MEMRI, Special Dispatch Series No.1975 (2 July 2008).

Further economic sanctions and incentives

By far the best option, preferred by nearly everybody, particularly the EU, would be mounting diplomatic pressure, combined with economic sanctions and incentives, in the hope that these will eventually lead to Iranian compliance with the demands of the IAEA and the UN. This perspective, however, is rather bleak for various reasons.

First, Iran considers its nuclear programme as the inalienable right of a sovereign state. As we have seen, the government denies that it is pursuing military objectives, and it argues – in itself correctly – that the NPT gives ample scope for the development of nuclear energy. The programme already started under the Shah, and apart from a temporary freeze after the revolution in 1979, it has taken the Islamic Republic, after many years of work, to a point where it is approaching control over the complete nuclear fuel cycle. These huge investments will not be easily given up.

Moreover, the regime feels itself seriously threatened by the many American military bases and troops in the surrounding countries, and it has not forgotten the attack from Iraq in 1980 and the ensuing war, which was partly fought with weapons of mass destruction, and caused hundreds of thousands of casualties. And, of course, Israel is a nuclear power as well, even without being a party to the NPT.²³ The Iranian population, opposition groups included, by and large supports the atomic programme, so a regime change does not offer a solution, quite apart from the question of how such a change could be engineered from abroad.

The sanctions by the international community do not leave the leadership in Tehran entirely unaffected – Iran considers itself to be a prominent Muslim state, not a pariah – but so far these have only incurred some minor economic inconveniences. Economic sanctions can easily be bypassed, and Russia, China, and the EU still conduct, on a large scale, trade and investment relations with Iran. For instance, earlier this year the federal bureau for export controls in Berlin has given permission for a major German investment in the Iranian gas industry, despite protests from Jerusalem.²⁴ Research has shown that even severe economic sanctions seldomly lead to the desired outcome if the highest national interests are at stake.²⁵

²³ See for a recent analysis: *Nuclear Programmes in the Middle East. In the shadow of Iran* (London, International Institute for Strategic Studies 2008) pp. 119–140.

²⁴ *Der Spiegel* (online) (8 January 2008). Cf. Sico van der Meer, 'Economische sancties tegen Iran: successen en tegenvallers', 62 *Internationale Spectator*, No. 9 (September 2008) pp. 451–453.

²⁵ For an assessment see Ted Galen Carpenter, 'Iran's Nuclear Program. America's Policy Options', *Policy Analysis*, No. 578 (20 September 2006) pp. 4–5.

The fact that Tehran in June 2008 once more turned down a lucrative offer from the '3+3' team – large-scale economic cooperation in exchange for suspending enrichment – indicates clearly that economic costs and benefits are not of decisive importance for the strategic considerations of the ayatollahs.²⁶ It is therefore by no means certain that the additional sanctions which the EU set up in July 2008 will have the intended effect. Nor is it very likely that China and Russia, which already have great difficulty with the current set of sanctions, will agree to military means of coercion. China is very dependent on Iranian oil deliveries, while Vladimir Putin – still President at that time – said quite unambiguously during his visit to Tehran in April 2008 that he would not support a military option. As a result of the recent tensions between the West and Russia with regard to the crisis over Georgia it is not to be expected that Moscow has become more accommodating in this matter. Moscow in any case cancelled a meeting of the '3+3' group in New York in September 2008, which was supposed to plan a fourth set of UN sanctions against Iran in reply to the latest findings of the IAEA.²⁷

Reconciliation with an Iranian nuclear force

If further economic sanctions fail, and Iran continues its nuclear programme, essentially two options remain for the international community: it may either accept the new reality and try to come to terms with it, or it may apply military measures. The first possibility has many negative consequences, but compared with the perspective of yet another war in the Middle East, it might nevertheless be the second-best outcome for the EU, and certainly for Russia or China. A potential large-scale conflict in and over Iran would be a great disaster for the whole world, and therefore the international community will undoubtedly try, through containment, deterrence and whatever other means to accommodate the Iranian nuclear threat.²⁸

Even for the United States this might be the second-best outcome. Though many senior politicians and officials in the Bush/Cheney administration have

²⁶ The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the United States, Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom and Germany (the '3+3') have made this offer in their joint letter of 12 June 2008, that was presented in Tehran by Solana to the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Manuchehr Mottaki, a few days later. For Solana's press conference on this occasion, see: Council of the European Union, Spokesperson of the High Representative for the CFSP, S211/08, 14 June 2008.

²⁷ 'Russia scuttles meeting with US on Iran', *International Herald Tribune* (25 September 2008).

²⁸ The preferred approach of the German analyst Christoph Bertram in his paper: 'Rethinking Iran: From confrontation to cooperation', *Chaillot Paper No 110* (Paris, Institute for Security Studies of the European Union, August 2008).

repeatedly called for a US military strike against the nuclear facilities in Iran, it seems that in the latter days of his presidency, Bush has recoiled from the consequences of such unilateral and preventive measures. By 2008 a number of neoconservative diehards had left the administration. Everybody is haunted by another 'intelligence failure'. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have already stretched US military forces to the very limits. The rising national debts in the wake of the financial crisis make additional overseas military commitments nearly impossible. According to press reports President Bush would also have withheld American support for a possible Israeli strike in the summer of 2008.²⁹

But what about Israel itself, after all it does find itself first in the firing line? Despite the very real threat to the state (and the people) of Israel posed by an Iranian nuclear force, Jerusalem could nevertheless decide to live with the danger, and avert it by means of deterrence. In theory this is not impossible, given the nuclear status of Israel itself. Should Iran consider a nuclear attack, massive Israeli retaliation will follow, even if Iran succeeds in delivering the first blow. Hence, the two Middle East powers might together create a balance of terror, along the same lines as the American-Russian nuclear balance during the Cold War. Both parties, according to this reasoning, will refrain from nuclear brinkmanship because of the mutual destruction that would be assured.

Nevertheless, this scenario has some serious flaws.³⁰ First of all, Tehran does not meet the precondition of rationality, required for a credible deterrence. That presupposes that both parties want to prevent a nuclear war at all costs, in order to stave off their own destruction. The question is whether similar calculations are made by the ayatollahs. Anti-Jewish martyrdom is a cherished part of their fundamentalist ideology. And self-sacrifice is not an alien feature for a regime that sent huge waves of young Iranian soldiers to their certain deaths towards the Iraqi lines during the Iran-Iraq war. The former Iranian President, Ayatollah Rafsanjani, known as a moderate, already observed in 2001 that one single atomic bomb might destroy Israel, while a retaliatory attack on Iran would inflict only limited damage to the Muslim world as a whole.³¹

Successful mutual deterrence also requires reliable channels of communication, very clear hierarchies of control and command in both states, and at least a recognition of Israel's right of existence. An idea that is completely taboo among politicians for whom the liberation of holy Muslim territory in all of the former Palestine lands is a fundamental religious duty. Successive Israeli governments

²⁹ 'Israel asked US for green light to bomb nuclear sites in Iran', *The Guardian* (25 September 2008).

³⁰ See Yair Evron, 'An Israel-Iran Balance of Nuclear Deterrence: Seeds of Instability', in: Kam, ed., *supra* n. 17, at pp. 47-64.

³¹ Efraim Inbar, 'The need to block a nuclear Iran', 10 *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, No. 1 (March 2006).

of all stripes and colours, therefore, have come to the conclusion that they cannot live with this option. Even American security guarantees present no *panacea* to Jerusalem. Such guarantees mainly offer subsequent retaliation, and no solid physical protection against incoming Iranian ballistic missiles. This also holds true for the anti-missile shield that Israel is currently constructing with the help of *Arrow* systems provided by the United States. Undoubtedly a useful additional defence measure, but not the watertight protection needed by a people still haunted by the memory of the Holocaust. Israeli experts have also advised against building nuclear shelters in order not to give the population a false impression of safety.³²

Military intervention by Israel

This automatically leads us to the third distinct possibility: Israel kills off the Iranian nuclear programme by means of military force, without waiting for American approval or military assistance – probably the best prepared option in Israel's military history. The Israeli air force is familiar with risky operations far beyond its borders (Entebbe, Tunis, Osirak), and underlined this capacity in September 2007 by unexpectedly eliminating a presumed research reactor in the North of Syria.³³ The next possible assignment, however, is a lot more difficult. The Iranian nuclear installations are located much farther from Israel than the reactors in Iraq and Syria, and they are scattered over the whole country. Furthermore, they are fairly well-defended, and largely built in deep underground, heavily armoured spaces. Iran is also engaged in the purchase of a new generation of Russian anti-aircraft defence missiles, making it more difficult for Israeli aircraft to reach their goals. Yet, according to military experts, it can be done.³⁴ The Israeli air force has advanced F-15 and F-16 aircraft that are especially adapted to long-distance operations and, equipped with 'bunker busters', they are able to hit targets deep under the ground with great precision. And not all nuclear installations need to be eliminated. A few attacks directed at the key complexes of Isfahan or Natanz will probably do the job, at least for a couple of years. In the spring of 2008 the Israeli air force held extensive military exercises in and above the Mediterranean sea to practice the complications of long-distance flights.

³² See David Klein, 'A Nuclear Defense Policy for Israel without shelters', in Kam, ed., *supra* n. 17, pp. 83-96.

³³ Strangely enough without much fuss in the Arab world; possibly the presumed reactor was some sort of a dummy to test the Israeli readiness to attack.

³⁴ See Whitney Raas & Austin Long, 'Osirak Redux? Assessing Israeli Capabilities to Destroy Iranian Nuclear Facilities', 31 *International Security*, No. 4 (Spring 2007) pp. 7-33.

At the same time rumours about an imminent Israeli strike have increased.³⁵ Even European politicians have become alarmed. The former German Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, for instance – who participated in the initial EU3 contacts with Tehran in 2003 and has closely followed the developments since – has said that the main question is not ‘if’ Israel will strike, but ‘when’.³⁶ The French President Nicolas Sarkozy, partly in his capacity as the EU chair during the second half of 2008, has also warned Iran of an approaching Israeli strike.³⁷ He tried to convince Syria, an ally of Iran, to take the message home to Tehran.³⁸

But a great deal of uncertainty remains. Many factors come into play for the Israeli decision makers: the composition of a new Israeli cabinet, the perspective of further sanctions by the United Nations, the possible implications for the Palestinian-Israeli peace talks, and most importantly also the new American President. Though at the end of the day the government in Jerusalem retains the option to make up its own mind, it seems very unlikely that it would prefer to proceed without at least the silent consent of Washington.

At this point a new administration may complicate matters. President Bush had already refused, as we have seen, to give the green light to the military plans of Ehud Olmert, and it is most unlikely that the new American President will allow his term to begin with yet another military conflict in the Middle East. Barack Obama, for example, does not rule out military options against Iran, but if he is elected, he also wants to open direct negotiations with Tehran, without setting impossible prior preconditions. As long as these bilateral talks last, Israel obviously cannot resort to military action, while Tehran will do everything to delay the start and the proceedings of those talks. The new president is sworn in at the end of January 2009, and it may take many months before serious contacts will be made. Obama may also decide to wait for the next presidential elections in Iran, which will probably take place in June 2009, hoping that a more moderate candidate than Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will be elected. Either way, Israel has to wait as well.

And what will happen if Iran makes far-reaching concessions related to another American ambition: the Annapolis process? The Iranian leaders might prod their friends in Damascus to conclude peace with Israel, to diminish their support for Hezbollah or Hamas, and even to make moves to recognize Israel, without at the same time renouncing their nuclear programme. They could re-

³⁵ ‘Israeli ministers mull plans for military strike against Iran’, *Der Spiegel* (online) (16 June 2008); ‘It’s later than you think’, *The Economist* (26 June 2008); ‘Fear over Israel’s threat to strike Iran’, *Financial Times* (2 July 2008); ‘Israel asked US for green light to bomb nuclear sites in Iran’, *The Guardian* (25 September 2008).

³⁶ In an op-ed article for the Lebanese newspaper *Daily Star* (30 May 2008).

³⁷ ‘Sarkozy warns Iran it risks attack by Israel’, *Financial Times* (4 September 2008).

³⁸ MEMRI, Special Dispatch No. 2039 (3 September 2008).

play the 'grand bargain' of 2003, when – in vain – the Bush administration was offered a series of political concessions (but not on the nuclear programme) in return for the normalization of the bilateral relationship. This would pose an awful dilemma for the Israeli government. On the one hand, it would gain a serious perspective on peace and stability in the Palestinian territories and with their neighbours. But, on the other hand, the nuclear threat of Iran would remain. An Israeli military strike against Iran under such circumstances would, however, encounter huge resistance from the international community at large, the United States included. Even John McCain would probably not prefer to spoil the possibility to end the Palestinian-Israeli conflict with threats about bombing Iran. If, with the help of Tehran, the Annapolis process leads to a satisfactory outcome, diplomatic pressure would switch very soon from Iran to Israel. Some have pleaded, therefore, to strike still during Bush's time in office.³⁹

FINAL REMARK

Needless to say, any military intervention by either Israel and/or the United States will have far-reaching consequences for the world at large, Europe included. Iran could counter-attack American bases across the Gulf, stir up civil war in Iraq, let loose Hezbollah and Hamas in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, or resort to a variety of energy sanctions, including the closing of the Strait of Hormuz.⁴⁰ One does not need to share the doomsday feelings of IAEA chief ElBaradei ('an attack will simply create a ball of fire which will ricochet everywhere, every part of the world'), without admitting the huge effects for vital European security and economic interests.⁴¹

Against this backdrop the European Union and its Member States should become more aware of the urgency of the matter. European politicians and their public should wonder whether their favourite approach of diplomatic pressure, combined with economic sanctions and incentives, is indeed the best way forward. For the EU not much has been left from its early diplomatic role. The civilian instruments of the EU are practically exhausted. It is highly doubtful

³⁹ Like the Israeli historian Benny Morris, 'Using bombs to stave off war', *The New York Times* (18 July 2008). This viewpoint was shared by the former American ambassador to the UN, John Bolton, in the *Daily Telegraph* (24 June 2008).

⁴⁰ See Patrick Clawson & Michael Eisenstadt, *The Last Resort. Consequences of Preventive Military Action against Iran* (Washington DC, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP) 2008).

⁴¹ Quote of ElBaradei in: 'IAEA chief: Iran on path to build nukes', *Jerusalem Post* (26 September 2008).

whether tougher economic sanctions, within or outside the UN framework, will do the job. Tehran has essentially used the negotiations with the EU and the '3+3' group to gain time. Javier Solana has succeeded in keeping EU Member States together on this dossier, but that was partly because military options were left out of consideration. As usual, the EU Member States are divided over the use of force. Nicolas Sarkozy stated, shortly after taking office as President, that military measures cannot be excluded. Germany, however, is extremely reluctant to discuss this option, although Chancellor Angela Merkel declared during her visit to Jerusalem in May 2008 that the security of Israel is also the security of Germany. The crisis over Georgia in August 2008 and the resulting tensions with Russia have overshadowed the Iranian issue. The 'new cold war' is for most EU countries (and NATO) a more immediate concern than Iran. But the clock is ticking. It is not completely unthinkable that eventually Tehran will come round under imminent military pressure. To this effect close transatlantic cooperation is required in the months ahead, and a Western consensus on the possible use of military force by either Israel or the United States, if other measures fail. The EU should in any case become much more aware of the fact that playing the good cop only works if there is also a bad cop in the wings.⁴² Or that the case of Iran deserves even two bad cops.

⁴² Cf. Dalia Dassa Kaye, 'Time for Arms Talks? Iran, Israel, and the Middle East Arms Control', *Arms Control Today* (November 2004) p. 7.