

# THE SILENT STRIKE

*How Israel bombed a Syrian nuclear installation and kept it secret.*

BY DAVID MAKOVSKY

In the first days of March, 2007, agents from the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, made a daring raid on the Vienna home of Ibrahim Othman, the head of the Syrian Atomic Energy Commission. Othman was in town attending a meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency's board of governors, and had stepped out. In less than an hour, the Mossad operatives swept in, extracted top-secret information from Othman's computer, and left without a trace.

In recent months, Israel and the United States had become worried by Syria's nuclear ambitions. In the nineteen-nineties, Syrian President Hafez al-Assad sought to buy nuclear research reactors from Argentina and Russia, but the deals fell through under U.S. pressure. Toward the end of 2006, Israel began to pick up intelligence of possible renewed nuclear activity. There were also suspicions about a large, "enigmatic" building under construction in the desert of northeastern Syria, General Michael Hayden, the director of the C.I.A. at the time, told me.

The information the Mossad operatives recovered was damning: roughly three dozen color photographs taken from inside the Syrian building, indicating that it was a top-secret plutonium nuclear reactor. The reactor, called Al Kibar, was nine hundred yards from the Euphrates River and halfway between the borders with Turkey and Iraq. The photographs showed workers from North Korea at the site, which was far from Syria's biggest cities. The sole purpose of this kind of plutonium reactor, in the Mossad's analysis, was to produce an atomic bomb. Inside, the reactor had many of the same engineering elements as the North Korean reactor in Yongbyon—a model that no one but the North Koreans had built in the past thirty-five years.

Two and a half decades earlier, Israel

had dispatched bombers to Iraq to destroy the Osirak nuclear reactor. That strike marked the rise of the Begin doctrine, named for Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, which held that no Israeli adversary in the Middle East should be allowed to acquire a nuclear weapon. Israel itself has reportedly possessed nuclear weapons since roughly 1967, although it has never either admitted or denied it; the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies estimates that today Israel has as many as two hundred nuclear warheads. Off the record, Israeli officials reject any claim of moral equivalence between their reputed possession of nuclear weapons and Syria's. One reason, officials say, is Syria's relationship with Hezbollah and Hamas, both of which are considered terrorist organizations by the U.S. State Department.

On March 8th, days after the raid, Meir Dagan, the director of the Mossad, and two senior officials met with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and presented the findings from the raid. During a courtroom appearance last year, at which Olmert was facing corruption charges (he was largely acquitted), he never directly mentioned Dagan or the Syrian site, but he referred obliquely to "a piece of information" that had been put on his desk "such as rarely happens in the country." He added, "I knew from that moment, nothing would be the same again. The weight of this thing, at the existential level, was of an unprecedented scale." Olmert pledged to destroy the reactor as soon as possible; if it went "hot," radiation from its destruction could contaminate the Euphrates.

Five years later, the Al Kibar affair is still not discussed on the record in Israel. When referred to by journalists or military analysts, reports are usually credited to foreign sources. Word has gradually leaked out that Israel destroyed the Al Kibar reactor. Some of the details of the operation have been published. In

April, 2008, after several months of secrecy, U.S. intelligence officials finally briefed Congress on their evaluation of the reactor. The most senior members of the Bush Administration, including Bush himself, mentioned in their memoirs how the U.S. responded to the evidence on the reactor. In recent months, I have spoken with about two dozen Israeli and American officials who were knowledgeable about the fate of Al Kibar, to learn exactly what happened and why details of the affair have remained so closely guarded. As Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his government consider how to confront Iran's nascent nuclear program, Israel's response to Al Kibar has emerged as both an exemplary and a cautionary tale.

The small suite of offices where Prime Minister Olmert and a half dozen of his aides worked, in a nondescript government office building in Jerusalem, sits behind glass doors and was so closely watched that it was nicknamed the Aquarium. For that reason, in the days after the discovery of the Syrian installation, Olmert began hosting important meetings at his official residence, on Balfour Street, a couple of miles away.

Olmert, a former cabinet minister and onetime mayor of Jerusalem, had come to power in early 2006 on a platform of peace, and the war that summer with Hezbollah, in Lebanon, had been disastrous for his popularity. In December, in an attempt to restore his focus on peace-making, Olmert had begun holding regular meetings with Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the Palestinian Authority, to address the establishment of a Palestinian state. On February 15, 2007, a few weeks before the Mossad raid in Vienna, Olmert met with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in Ankara, and asked him to explore whether Syrian President Bashar al-Assad—the son of Hafez—would be willing to open secret peace talks with Israel. After meeting with Assad on April 3rd, Erdogan reported back to Olmert that Assad was willing. By that time, Israel had discovered evidence of the Syrian reactor, and a grim resolve had set in.

The briefings on Balfour Street began with Israel's former Prime Ministers, including Shimon Peres, Ehud Barak, and Netanyahu, Olmert's political rival. The



*The Mossad extracted evidence of the nuclear site from the computer of a Syrian official.*

leaders were summoned one by one, to insure confidentiality and to prevent leaks. A second group—including Amir Peretz, the Defense Minister; Gabi Ashkenazi, the Israel Defense Force's chief of staff; Amos Yadlin, the I.D.F. head of military intelligence; Yuval Diskin, the head of the Shin Bet, Israel's security service; and Dagan, of the Mossad—met most Fridays from late March of 2007 through early September. Each member signed a secrecy agreement.

The time came to inform the Americans. On April 18th, during a routine visit to Israel, Robert Gates, George W. Bush's Secretary of Defense, met with his Israeli counterpart, Peretz. Because Peretz does not speak English fluently, an index card was prepared for him, which he could refer to as he divulged the news about the reactor. Olmert also dispatched Dagan, along with two of Olmert's top personal aides, Yoram Turbowicz and Shalom

Turgemen—nicknamed TnT by U.S. officials—to Washington, to report the news to other senior U.S. officials. Dagan briefed his U.S. counterpart, Hayden, the C.I.A. director. Dagan, Turbowicz, and Turgemen met with Vice-President Dick Cheney and the national-security adviser, Steve Hadley. Dagan presented them with the photographs of the site and other information. According to one former senior U.S. official, Cheney, who had been urging the intelligence community to investigate a link between North Korea and Syria, was vindicated by the news.

President Bush instructed his intelligence chiefs to verify the Israeli claims; the disastrous intelligence failure on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq was fresh in everyone's mind. Bush's words, according to the former U.S. senior official, were "Gotta be secret, and gotta be sure." A C.I.A. crisis task force was established, and, according to the same

official, the C.I.A. compared “handheld” photographs of the site with “overheads” taken by American satellites. The photographs were then given to the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, which analyzes imagery and map-based intelligence for policymakers and the national-security community. The N.G.A. determined that the two sets of photographs were valid, as did nuclear experts at the Department of Energy and an outside nuclear-proliferation authority. Finally, an ad-hoc C.I.A. “red team” concluded, according to the former senior U.S. official, “If it’s not a nuclear reactor, then it’s a fake nuclear reactor.”

While U.S. intelligence officials scrambled to confirm the Israeli report, Hadley, the national-security adviser, directed an interagency deputies committee—known, with deliberate blandness, as the Drafting Committee—to develop policy options. The committee’s members included Elliott Abrams, a deputy national-security adviser; James Jeffrey, a top Middle East specialist at the State Department, who was later the deputy national-security adviser; Eric Edelman, a senior aide to Gates who had previously served as the Ambassador to Turkey; and Eliot Cohen, who was counsellor to the State Department under Condoleezza Rice. No personal aides were included in the group’s secure government e-mails. The policy options were not circulated on any government computers, and the

committee’s members were forbidden from taking any relevant documents out of the White House Situation Room.

From the start, several members of the Drafting Committee were skeptical that diplomacy could neutralize Syria’s nuclear program. The fear was that Assad would stall in order to buy time for the reactor to go hot, at which point military action would become too risky. Over several Tuesday afternoons, an even more senior national-security group gathered in Hadley’s office in the West Wing of the White House. At the time, few from the group advocated American military action. “Every Administration gets one preemptive war against a Muslim country,” Gates told Edelman, half in jest, “and this Administration has already done one.”

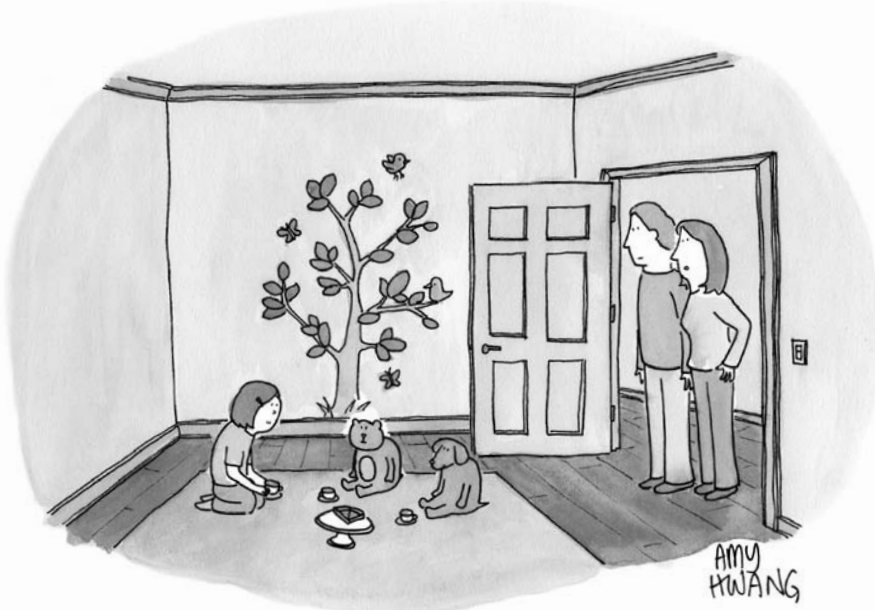
Moreover, Israel’s 2006 war with Hezbollah had weakened Rice’s faith in Israel’s military judgment. “Condi thought that the Israeli military was unreliable and that they were no longer the ten-foot giants that we had grown up with,” a former senior Administration official told me. Rice feared that a strike would lead to a wider conflict, including war with both Syria and Hezbollah. She was also invested in two diplomatic initiatives: six-party talks with North Korea about its nuclear program and a Middle East peace conference that would be held later that year, in Annapolis. Meanwhile, the Administration was staring down the

end of its tenure. “We were just turning the corner in Iraq, and there was an uneasy sense about Afghanistan,” Eliot Cohen told me. “Many in the Administration were deeply reluctant to start what they thought would be a third Middle Eastern war. They thought the American people would have no patience for it, quite apart from their own aversion to such a prospect.”

On June 17th at the White House residence, just before a scheduled visit from Olmert, Bush met with advisers in the Yellow Oval Room, which encouraged intimacy and informality, and which allowed Bush to “be in a listening rather than deciding mode,” according to another former senior official. Recounting that period for a 2011 *Washington Post* article, Hayden said that he “told the President that Al Kibar was part of a nuclear weapons program” and that “we could conceive of no alternative uses for the facility.” But, because they “could not identify the other essentials of a weapons program,” such as a reprocessing plant or active work on a warhead, Hayden wrote, “we cautiously characterized this finding as ‘low confidence.’”

The Administration conceded that the reactor could go hot in the coming months, but, once the term “low confidence” had been invoked, Bush no longer felt he had the political cover to justify a preemptive strike. In his memoir, Bush says that he told Olmert, “I cannot justify an attack on a sovereign nation unless my intelligence agencies stand up and say it’s a weapons program.” David Albright, a nuclear-proliferation expert at the Institute for Science and International Security, told me that a reprocessing plant has yet to be found; then again, he noted, Syria has not granted anyone permission to look for one.

Olmert met with American officials in Washington on June 19th. He told reporters that he was there to discuss Iran and the Palestinian peace process, but, in his meetings with Bush and Cheney, he urged that the U.S. lead the attack on the Syrian reactor. Olmert argued that a U.S. strike would “kill two birds with one stone,” allowing Bush to remind the international community of Assad’s villainy and send a message dissuading Iran from pursuing its own nuclear program. Olmert told Bush that if the U.S. did not destroy the reactor, Israel



*“I should have bought toys with better posture.”*

would, even if it lacked support from the Americans. Bush promised an answer shortly.

On July 12th, Bush convened a second meeting, and declared that he would send an envoy to Syria with an ultimatum for Assad to begin dismantling the reactor. The five permanent members of the Council, or P5—the United States, Russia, China, Britain, and France—would oversee the dismantling.

Bush called Olmert at eight o'clock the next morning. If the Americans were to hit the reactor, he said, the Administration would have to explain to Congress that the intelligence had come from Israel. Was this what Olmert wanted? Bush offered to send Rice to the region, but Olmert replied that he was not interested in a visit from Rice, and said he feared that a diplomatic route would simply enable Syria to stall until the reactor went hot. In his memoir, Bush wrote that “the prime minister was disappointed” at the U.S. preference for diplomacy, adding that Olmert told him, “This is something that hits at the very serious nerves of this country.” The American nuclear-prevention policy toward North Korea and Pakistan was characterized as “too early, too early—oops—too late,” Ariel Levite, a nonresident senior associate in the nonproliferation program at the Carnegie Endowment, told me. The Israelis also believed that a diplomatic focus would undermine the surprise of a military operation. Once Assad realized that he had been caught, as Abrams put it to me, what would stop him from putting a kindergarten near the site, or from deploying anti-aircraft weaponry?

Although the U.S. and Israel agreed on the fundamental facts and risks, they had reached opposing policy conclusions. Until the phone call from Bush, Olmert hoped that the United States would lead the attack. Now he was worried that any U.S. official who was not on board with the Israeli strike would try to sabotage it by leaking information, and he expressed his fears to Bush. The President promised Olmert that the American side would remain “buttoned up.”

Bush probably did not relish further military action and feared a repeat of the intelligence debacle in Iraq, but he seems to have understood Olmert's position. At no point did Bush suggest that the U.S.

would block Israeli action. “Olmert said he did not ask Bush for a green light, but Bush did not give Olmert a red light,” an Israeli general told me. “Olmert saw it as green.”

The Israelis began preparations for a unilateral attack. The I.D.F. and the Israeli Air Force considered three possible strategies: a wide strike by the Israeli Air Force, nicknamed Fat Shkedi, after Israel's Air Force chief, General Eliezer Shkedi; a narrower strike, nicknamed Skinny Shkedi; and a ground attack by special forces.

A key consideration was the desire to minimize the potential of a response from Damascus. Since discovering the reactor, many Israeli officials had concluded that the lower the signature of the attack the less likely Syria would be to retaliate. By failing to report the presence of a nuclear reactor, Assad would be violating his obligations to the International Atomic Energy Agency. To avoid drawing further attention to this violation—not to mention the humiliation of having its nuclear ambitions exposed and thwarted by Israel—Assad might prefer to bury the matter. Psychologists consulted by the I.D.F., who had profiled Assad for years, argued that Syrian retaliation might be avoided if Israel did not corner the President by publicly claiming credit for a strike, thus preserving for Assad what Israeli security officials called a “zone of denial.” Assad's decision not to take any direct hostile action against Israel during its 2006 war with Hezbollah, in Lebanon, demonstrated that he saw the advantage of avoiding military confrontation with Israel. Also, from what the Israelis could discern, the Al Kibar reactor was in a remote location; a strike would be unlikely to cause civilian fatalities or even draw public attention.

Given these factors, the I.D.F., the Mossad, and the Foreign Ministry, led by Tzipi Livni, all favored a low-signature attack on the reactor. Back in June, an Israeli special-operations unit had been dispatched to within a mile of the site to take and transmit additional photos, bring back soil samples, and provide Israel with other information it needed for a strike.

By June, Peretz had lost the Labor Party leadership and the position of Defense Minister passed to Ehud Barak, the former Prime Minister, former Army

chief of staff, and one of the most decorated soldiers in Israeli history. The “two Ehuds,” Olmert and Barak, had a cordial relationship, despite belonging to different parties. When Olmert was the mayor of Jerusalem, in the nineties, he defended Barak, then the Prime Minister, from the usual refrain from the right that a Labor leader would cede half of Jerusalem to the Palestinians. (In fact, Barak did offer significant parts of Jerusalem during the Camp David summit in 2000.)

But the friendship did not endure. Barak told his fellow cabinet ministers that he feared a repeat of the 2006 war, and thought it would be better to delay the attack on Al Kibar. This would give Israel's military command in the north sufficient time to prepare for possible Syrian retaliation. For Olmert, the 2006 Lebanon war had established deterrence; Hezbollah had not openly fired a shot at Israel since then. Olmert suspected that Barak had another reason for putting off an attack on Al Kibar. The final report of the Winograd Commission, a government-appointed inquiry into the decisions involved in the 2006 war with Hezbollah, was anticipated around the end of the year and was expected to criticize Olmert for his handling of the war and weaken him politically. Olmert worried that Barak would seize upon the report's findings, trigger Olmert's ouster as Prime Minister, and lead the operation against the Syrian reactor himself.

In Israel, all major military actions that could lead to war must be approved by the security cabinet. Olmert invited several members of the security cabinet separately to his home and briefed them on Al Kibar. Each signed a written vow of secrecy, agreeing to face investigation if he or she leaked information. Over the next five weeks, a half-dozen extraordinary security-cabinet meetings unfolded. Barak argued that a careful attack in the early phases after the reactor went hot would not contaminate the Euphrates. Olmert gave a long and persuasive rejoinder. “It may have been the most dramatic set of sessions that I can ever recall in the security cabinet,” one of the cabinet ministers in attendance told me.

On September 1st, Turbowicz told the White House that preparations were almost complete. Israel informed one

other country's intelligence service before the strike—Britain's MI6—but did not share the exact timing of the attack with either country.

On September 5th, the security cabinet deliberated for the last time, and voted to strike. (The only minister to abstain from voting was Avi Dichter.) The cabinet also voted to grant Olmert, Barak, and Livni sole power to approve the military approach and the timing of the strike. Barak and Olmert had made several handwritten amendments to the text of the resolution that ordered the strike, explicitly indicating the potential for war. After the cabinet session, Olmert, Barak, and Livni reconvened in the briefing room adjacent to Olmert's office. The chief of staff came into the room and recommended attacking that night, using the Skinny Shkedi approach. After the chief of staff left, Olmert, Barak, and Livni voted unanimously to proceed.

Just before midnight on September 5, 2007, four F-15s and four F-16s took off from Israeli Air Force bases, including Ramat David, southeast of Haifa. After flying north along the Mediterranean Coast, the planes turned east and followed the Syrian-Turkish border, to avoid detection by radar. Using standard electronic scrambling tools, the Israelis blinded Syria's air-defense system. In Tel Aviv, in a room of the underground I.A.F. command-and-control center known as "the pit," Olmert, Barak, Livni, and senior security officials followed the planes by radar. The room would serve as a bunker for Olmert in the event that the strike sparked a war; the Israelis had also prepared a military contingency plan.

General Shkedi tracked the pilots by audio in an adjacent room. Sometime between 12:40 and 12:53 A.M., the pilots uttered the computer-generated code word of the day, "Arizona," indicating that seventeen tons of explosives had been dropped on their target. "There was a sense of elation," one participant recalled. "The reactor was destroyed and we did not lose a pilot."

The next day, the Syrian Arab News Agency announced that Israeli planes had entered Syrian airspace but had been repelled: "Air-defense units confronted them and forced them to leave after they dropped some ammunition in deserted

areas without causing any human or material damage." The Israelis say that not a single Syrian air-defense missile was launched. At least ten, and perhaps as many as three dozen, workers were killed in the strike.

As the planes returned to their bases, Olmert went to his secondary office, at the Kirya defense complex, in Tel Aviv, and asked to be connected to Bush, who was in Australia. "I just want to report to



you that something that existed doesn't exist anymore," Olmert told him. "It was done with complete success."

Syria has consistently denied that it had a reactor, and the responses from its administration officials have been contradictory. Three weeks after the strike, President Assad told the BBC that Israeli warplanes had attacked an unused military building and said that Damascus reserved "the right to retaliate," though not necessarily in a "bomb for bomb" manner. Meanwhile, Bashar Ja'afari, the Syrian Ambassador to the United Nations, continued to insist that nothing was bombed in Syria and that Israeli planes "were encountered by our air defense fire" and were forced to drop their ammunition and fuel tanks.

"Nobody in Syria believed that Israel did this," Andrew Tabler, a Syria expert who is a fellow at the Washington Institute and was in Damascus at the time, told me. "People believed the regime." Syrians were incredulous on two accounts, Tabler said: that Assad had secretly built a reactor and that Israel had demolished it. Even as confirmation of some sort of strike came out in the world press, Syria did not strike back. This reinforced Israel's initial psychological reading: as long as Assad could deny the existence of the reactor, he would not feel pressured to retaliate.

The Israelis helped secure that zone of denial. They briefed their regional allies, including Egypt and Jordan, and urged their leaders to refrain from making pub-

lic statements about the strike. Olmert flew to Moscow to brief Russia, which has close ties with Assad. Dick Cheney was eager to expose the flagrant role of North Korea in the Syrian project and argued for disclosure. But Condoleezza Rice, keen to preserve the six-party diplomatic talks with North Korea, urged that the request for silence be honored. She prevailed.

On October 23rd, Olmert met Erdogan in London to brief him on the attack and on Israel's motives. During the meeting, Olmert asked Erdogan to gauge Syrian interest in re-starting peace negotiations. Assad agreed to indirect peace talks, which began in Ankara in February, 2008; they ended that December, when Syria and Turkey withdrew in protest over Israel's war against Gaza. Israelis say the two sides never discussed the Al Kibar strike.

As the months went by, and the odds of Syrian retaliation diminished, Bush asked Olmert for permission to tell certain senators and representatives what had happened. Details had begun to leak out, and members of the congressional intelligence committees were upset that they had not been briefed. Moreover, there was a fierce debate within the Administration over the decision not to go public about North Korea's role in the construction of the Syrian reactor. Olmert relented; in Israel, however, official restrictions remain.

After rebuffing repeated requests by the I.A.E.A. to visit the site, Syria ultimately permitted a small group of inspectors, including Olli Heinonen, to visit for one day in June, 2008. The inspectors found particles of man-made uranium in the samples, which Syria claimed were the residue of the bombing. In 2009, the inspectors reported that graphite had also been found at the site; Syria again issued a denial. In its most recent report, the I.A.E.A. concluded that the site was "very likely" a nuclear reactor.

When I met with Heinonen this past spring, he told me that the site had been cleaned up before the inspectors' visit. His statement echoed a cable, released by WikiLeaks in 2010 to an Israeli daily, that Condoleezza Rice sent to State Department representatives around the world on April 25, 2008, after the congressional briefing. "Syria's concealment and lies about what happened for months now after the Israeli air strike is compelling proof that it has something to hide," Rice wrote. "In fact, after the attack on

the site, Syria went to great lengths to clean up the site and destroy evidence of what was really there." Syria's cleanup effort was also monitored and confirmed by I.D.F. satellites.

Heinonen said that one of the inspectors' escorts at the site was General Mohammed Suleiman, who served as a primary regime contact on various issues related to Iran. An Israeli general called him the head of the Syrian "shadow army," meaning he dealt with issues unrelated to Syria's conventional Army, such as transferring Iranian weapons to Hezbollah. Israeli officials say that Suleiman, a fellow-Alawite and longtime friend of the Assad family, was believed to be one of the very few senior regime officials who knew of the reactor's existence.

On August 1, 2008, Suleiman was killed by snipers while hosting a dinner at his weekend home overlooking the sea at the Syrian port city of Tartus. The operation is believed to have been carried out jointly by the Mossad and the Shayetet 13, or Flotilla 13, an elite commando unit of the Israeli Navy that specializes in sea-to-land incursions and counterterrorism. Nobody else was injured. Israel has never acknowledged the assassination.

Olmert's poll numbers did not recover after the fallout of the 2006 war, and the rest of his term as Prime Minister was marred by corruption charges, even as he continued Palestinian peace talks with Abbas. In July, 2008, he announced that he would resign his position, and he left office after elections the following February. This July, Olmert was cleared of charges of receiving illicit cash payments and of double-billing Israeli organizations for travel expenses, but convicted on breach of trust. He faces another trial on corruption charges related to a Jerusalem real-estate deal, but some recent polls show that if Olmert were to head a new centrist coalition it would run strongly against Netanyahu's party. If he is acquitted of the final charge, many analysts in Israel expect him to attempt a political comeback, though he has denied it in public.

**F**or Israel, the raid on Al Kibar was an unparalleled success. The Begin doctrine was reaffirmed, and neither Syria nor Hezbollah has encroached on Israel since. The pressing question

today is whether the lessons of that success can be applied to Iran, which has insisted, against all evidence, that its nuclear ambitions are limited to civilian purposes, and whether Israel and the U.S. view the threat the same way.

Barak is a leading proponent of a possible unilateral strike on Iran. In his public statements and in private conversations, he has referred to the "sword on Israel's neck"—the prospect of a regional neighbor and an outspoken enemy of the state acquiring the ability to destroy it. He cites a May 20th statement by Hassan Firouzabadi, the chief of staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, that his country is committed to the "full annihilation of Israel." Olmert told me, "Israel cannot tolerate an enemy with militarized nuclear power. We did not tolerate it in the past, whether it was in Iraq or Syria, and we cannot tolerate it in Iran."

A nuclear Iran also poses a considerable threat to American interests. "The entire world has an interest in preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon," President Obama said in a speech on March 4, 2012. "An Iranian nuclear weapon could fall into the hands of a terrorist organization. It is almost certain that others in the region would feel compelled to get their own nuclear weapon, triggering an arms race in one of the world's most volatile regions. It would embolden a regime that has brutalized its own people, and it would embolden Iran's proxies, who have carried out terrorist attacks from the Levant to southwest Asia." It would also undermine American credibility. Nuclear nonproliferation is a signature issue for Obama and has been for the U.S. since the Second World War. The last three Administrations, both Democratic and Republican, have pledged that Iran will not be allowed to develop a nuclear program.

Yet the situation in Iran differs fundamentally from the Syrian case. The Syrian affair was known to only a small number of officials in Damascus, Israel, and Washington, whereas the prospect of striking Iran's nuclear program has been vigorously discussed in public. Experts have pointed to the risk of civilian casualties and prolonged retaliation. What's more, a key Iranian site lies deep underground outside the holy city of Qom, and

it is strongly fortified; an attack on it would run a higher risk of failure. A strike might set back the Iranian program, but for how long, and at what cost? Some Israeli officials have expressed concern that a strike would only provide Iran with justification to pursue its nuclear program.

The issue in Israel is whether the Americans have sufficient resolve to thwart Iran's nuclear ambitions. Obama has declared, "I don't bluff," and has said that all options are on the table, including the use of force. So far, efforts by the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council and Germany have focussed on diplomacy and U.S.-led sanctions on Iran's export of oil and other economic sectors. Israel may not be so patient. "Israel often believes it stands alone," one official who deals with national-security issues told me. "If there are differences with the U.S. over Iran, Israel will assume, as it has in the past, that whoever's national security is most directly impacted will have to act even if the other does not agree."

Olmert was more cautious. "Each case must be examined separately," he said. "The Iraqi case was different from the Syrian case, and the Syrian case is different from the Iranian case." Olmert placed himself in the camp of former high-ranking officials, including Ashkenazi, Dagan, and Diskin, who are openly opposed to unilateral Israeli action against Iran; he has publicly urged Netanyahu not to pursue that approach. "Worse comes to worst, and all options have been tried, then, naturally, it may force Israel to act to defend its existence," he told me. "But it must be clear that we tried with the international community, and particularly with the United States, to act together before we resort to the last option of an Israeli military operation."

As in 2007, Israel is likely to assess the situation in Iran with an eye to its own security. Speaking to Israel's National Security College in July, 2012, Barak declared, "I am well aware of the depth and complexities involved in preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. However, I am certain beyond any doubt that dealing with that challenge" of a nuclear-armed Iran "from the hour of its emergence—if it emerges—will be far more complicated, far more dangerous, and far more costly in human lives and resources." ♦