

The coming giant internal Israeli war over a nuclear Iran - A 2010 rematch

Sources break down Israeli defense officials' disagreements.



A member of Iranian Border Guards wears a protective face mask, following an outbreak of the new coronavirus, inside the Shalamcha Border Crossing, after Iraq shut a border crossing to travelers between Iraq and Iran, Iraq March 8, 2020 - (photo credit: REUTERS/ESSAM AL-SUDANI)

A massive internal storm may be coming that the coronavirus may delay, but cannot stop.

If it does, it will pit Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Mossad Director Yossi Cohen and others against Blue and White leaders Benny Gantz and Gabi Ashkenazi, as well as IDF Chief of Staff Lt.- Gen. Aviv Kochavi, over how to deal with Iran.

According to numerous interviews by The Jerusalem Post with current and former Mossad, CIA and other national security officials in the US and Israel, a point may get closer where the Islamic Republic of Iran will escalate its levels of uranium enrichment dangerously close to levels where it could weaponize within a short period.

This will draw Netanyahu, Cohen and their camp closer to a desire to preemptively strike Iran, while Gantz, Ashkenazi, Kochavi and their camp are more likely to define the "point of no return" - after which Tehran cannot be stopped from going nuclear - as a good bit later.

This debate would echo the all-out fight between Netanyahu and Gantz and Ashkenazi in 2010 and afterwards.

During that period, the Blue and White MKs followed each other as IDF chiefs and, especially Ashkenazi, helped block an Israeli preemptive strike, along with then-Mossad chiefs Meir Dagan and Tamir Pardo.

Pardo has since confirmed that he even discussed the issue with then-attorney-general Yehuda Weinstein. He explained that he believed a Netanyahu order to

move pieces in place for a near-immediate attack on Iran without full security cabinet approval was illegal and said Weinstein confirmed his position.

There are multiple narratives, with one involving confusing moves by Netanyahu and then-defense minister Ehud Barak to merely scare the world into thinking they would attack.

But the majority public narrative is that the defense establishment's opposition blocked Netanyahu and Barak from launching an attack.

Most expert estimates already have Tehran's time to break out for a nuclear bomb – if it chooses to do so, which all agree it has not yet – down from 12 months to between three and a half to six months.

In early March, the usually relatively Iran-friendly International Atomic Energy Agency reported that the ayatollahs already had enough low-level (between 3.67-5%) enriched uranium for a nuclear weapon – should Iran make the decision to enrich to higher levels.

Multiple intelligence sources have indicated to the Post a belief that the Islamic Republic may jump to 20% enrichment, a step it took before the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

Some sources even speculated that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei may greenlight a small amount of enrichment at the 60% level (uranium becomes weaponized at the 90% level) – an idea the country already played with months ago, but has not yet carried out.

But sources have indicated that top intelligence officials in favor of an earlier military option to stop Iran from getting a nuclear bomb are not looking at just one specific factor.

Rather, they are looking at the full picture of Tehran's actions, which will indicate whether it has made the decision to go to the threshold.

According to intelligence officials who view the point of no return as an earlier point in time, they look at nuclear enrichment as a more decisive factor for interpreting Iran's intentions than the ability to deliver a nuclear weapon.

Put differently, they believe Israel would need to act militarily once Iran has enough nuclear material for a weapon, and that it could not wait for the point at which it is confirmed that Iran can properly fire the weapon.

The rationale of these intelligence officials is that enriching uranium and working on weapons delivery issues, though separate skills to master, do not need to happen in a chronological fashion.

Instead, intelligence officials have noted to the Post that the Islamic Republic could be working through problems with delivering a nuclear warhead on its Shahab 3 missile or other missiles in parallel to its uranium enrichment.

Further, these officials said once Iran gets to within a certain proximity to enough weaponized material for a nuclear bomb, the uncertainties – which might drag out

the process by some period of weeks or might be solved immediately - are too fluid.

THERE IS a lesson from the North Korea case.

With North Korea, at some point, the world was surprised by how slow it moved forward with developing nuclear weapons. However, later it shocked the world by being months ahead of what was expected. Exporting this lesson to Iran, it means the point of no return cannot wait for the clock to run out entirely.

Those intelligence officials in this camp are also keeping a careful eye on relations between the IAEA and the ayatollahs. Relations have gotten shakier since the March report, which used harsher language than usual against the regime.

In contrast, in January, Kochavi publicly laid out that he did not view Iran as a real nuclear threat until deep into 2021.

The Post has asked the IDF if Kochavi might move his calendar up by nine months since he also predicted in January that Tehran would not have enough low-enriched uranium for a bomb before December. Yet, the regime crossed that threshold already in March.

The IDF did not respond and has not issued a revised timeline.

This suggests that the IDF will not change its calendar as long as Iran is not enriching uranium to higher levels.

However, even more significantly, Kochavi explicitly treated the issues of uranium enrichment and nuclear weapons delivery as separate and chronological. He said weapons delivery pushed the nuclear threat off until deep into 2021.

It appears that this was the position of Ashkenazi and Gantz back in the 2010 era when they held Kochavi's job.

At that point - and leading up to the 2015 nuclear deal - Iran went far beyond where it is today with nuclear enrichment, yet they were still dead set against Netanyahu and Barak's discussion/order to attack.

Before the 2015 nuclear deal, Iran had enough low-enriched uranium for around 10 nuclear bombs and had substantial amounts of uranium enriched to the 20% level - which it has not done yet this time.

So even if Khamenei brings Iran far beyond its current uranium stock of low-enriched uranium for one weapon, and if he orders uranium enrichment at the 20% level, a rematch could mean Netanyahu's Blue and White partners trying to hold him back from an attack.

Kochavi in the present, and Gantz, Ashkenazi, Dagan, and Pardo from the past and present, in part represent an IDF mentality of needing to juggle short-term threats, like Hezbollah and Hamas, with long-term threats. They also represent an intelligence perspective beyond the IDF that even a surgical strike solely on Iran's nuclear facilities could likely lead to a broader war with Iran and its proxies.

In contrast, Netanyahu and Cohen now, and Barak in the past, represented a mentality that the risks of Iran developing a nuclear weapon are so great (that it

might use a weapon or that it could use the weapon to act more aggressively in the region) that it trumps other risks and warrants acting sooner. This future internal war, a rematch of the 2010 era, could decide the fate of the country.

Source:

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