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The next Middle East war

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I asked a friend of mine who works in a reputable research centre in Washington whether he expected Israel to launch a military strike against Iran. He pondered the question for a few moments and then gave an answer that conveyed both yes and no at the same time.

He was certain neither Netanyahu nor any other Israeli leader could undertake such an action without receiving a green light from Washington. He paused briefly and then said, "Israel could not afford to take a step of that magnitude on its own, because of the enormous repercussions it would have on the future of the region, and perhaps the world."

Just as I was about to ask my next question he resumed, "As long as Washington continues to talk of not putting American lives at risk, no one in Israel would dare act unilaterally. But the moment that the Obama administration stops using that rhetoric then you know that the time is at hand."

Between the lines this reads: Israeli and US thinking on the question of Iran's possession of a nuclear weapon is the same, as was the case with respect to Iraq when Israel bombed the Osirak nuclear reactor near Baghdad. The difference is that, today, American flesh and blood is present on the ground in Iraq, Afghanistan and the countries of the Gulf, and US interests in that area more intensive, more extensive and more

densely populated with staff and dependents than ever before. Therefore, if Israel started a war, Israel would not be the only party to sustain the consequences through, for example, retaliation against its own nuclear facilities and other military responses. In fact, the bulk of the damage would be borne by the US in terms of lives, material and political damage.

Just as I was about to ask what was new in that perpetually close US-Israeli relationship, my interlocutor pre-empted me with the question as to whether I had been following Ehud Barak's visits to Washington. After I told him that I had not, he said that never before in contemporary Israeli history had a minister of defence made so many visits to Washington -- one every three weeks or so -- with these visits interspersed by visits from other Israeli Ministry of Defence and Mossad officials and visits by their American counterparts to Tel Aviv. Such intensive exchanges indicate that some very important strategic matter is afoot and that this requires a lot of face-to-face talks, exchanges of opinion and points of view, and ironing out of differences over procedures and ways of working.

"Don't forget that the way Israel works militarily is completely different from Washington. Israel identifies its primary strategic target and then trains all its forces on hitting it, and that's all there is to it. That's what happened when it struck the Osirak reactor in Iraq and Al-Kibar reactor in northern Syria. In fact, Israel never even admitted to carrying out that latter strike, leaving it up to others to draw their own conclusions." If the US wanted to carry out an operation of that sort, the US military would use a completely different approach. It would not strike the target until after having first destroyed all the enemy's defence fortifications that could obstruct the ability to reach the target. Second, it would try to paralyse the enemy air force to prevent it from hampering the missions of American aircraft. Third, it would ascertain that it had neutralised all hostile missile bases and retaliatory capacities for at least a sufficiently reasonable period so that friendly targets would have the time to prepare themselves. Only then would it deliver the strike, and in a way that would be both surgical but painful. Reconciling such completely different military working styles is a hugely complicated and arduous task.

Clearly then, although it is not yet time to strike, planning and preparation are proceeding full steam ahead. In this regard, Barak is acting not only in the capacity of military coordinator but also as foreign minister because -- as my interlocutor put it -- no one in Washington can stand Lieberman. When the official Israeli foreign minister wants to meet American Likudist extremists he goes to New York, waits there for an invitation from Washington that never comes, and flies back to Israel. So, if anyone from the current Israeli government (apart from Netanyahu, of course) is going to tend to the political side of matters with the US it is Ehud Barak.

Reviewing developments on this front since the beginning of the year, the US chief-of-staff visited Israel in January to discuss the Iranian nuclear escalation. In February, US National Security Advisor James Jones and US Intelligence Chief Leon Panetta paid follow-up visits, the latter secretly. Before the month was out, Ehud Barak was in

Washington to discuss sanctions against Iran and ways of dealing with the Iranian nuclear question, as well as security cooperation and the missile defence system, and the situation in the Middle East and the Palestinian territories. No sooner did Barak return to Israel than Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen arrived there to discuss ways of sustaining the qualitative superiority of the Israeli armed forces and common security challenges. That was on 28 February. Then, shortly after Mullen returned to the US, Israeli Chief-of-Staff Gabi Ashkenazy returned the visit, appearing in Washington in March to discuss the Iranian nuclear question. Just over a month later, on 28 April, Ehud Barak came to Washington to meet Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to discuss Israeli security. There followed a series of visits to Israel by US Vice-President Joe Biden, the secretary of defence and other security officials, and return visits to Washington by Netanyahu with his teams of advisors. This brings us up to 26 July and Ehud Barak's most recent call on Washington to discuss the Iranian nuclear question, negotiations with the Palestinians and an Israeli shopping list for American weapons.

A few days before that meeting, Daniel Kurtzer, who served as US ambassador to Cairo and then to Tel Aviv and who is currently a professor of Middle Eastern policy studies at Princeton University, came out with a short contingency planning paper for the Council on Foreign Relations in New York entitled, *A Third Lebanon War*. The paper takes the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 as the first Lebanon war and the war in the summer of 2006 as the second. It foresees a possible eruption of a third Israeli war against Lebanon sometime between 12 and 18 months from now as the result of three interrelated factors. The first is Hizbullah's growing political clout in Lebanon since the second Lebanon war. Secondly, Hizbullah's arsenal is now more powerful quantitatively and qualitatively than it was at that time, having since steadily rearmed with Iranian and Syrian help, in spite of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 calling for the disarmament of all militias in Lebanon and the implementation of the Lebanese cabinet decision of 26 July 2006 stating that "there shall be no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese state." Thirdly, Israel sees Hizbullah as a forward military arm for Iran that could either deliver a first strike or a retaliatory strike in the event of an Israeli attack against Iranian nuclear facilities.

Kurtzer sees several indicators of looming danger. One is the increase in Hizbullah's anti-Israeli rhetoric, as exemplified by Hassan Nasrallah's fiery speech of 4 June when he warned that attacks against Lebanon would be met with strikes against strategic targets in Israel. In Israel, meanwhile, there has been a similar increase in official statements and public commentary about Hizbullah and Iran. Particular play has been given to weapons shipments to Lebanon and military training camps, prompting intensive debate in the Israeli media over whether Israel should be intercepting ships it suspects of carrying weapons to Lebanon. A third factor is heightened levels of Israeli military and civil defence preparedness. Kurtzer notes that the IDF exercise "Firestone 12" was predicated on scenario involving extensive Hizbullah assaults against Israel using long- range missiles and advanced air-defence systems.

What strikes one most about this contingency paper is that it advises the US administration to do all in its power to forestall such a war. Kurtzer suggests measures ranging from diplomatic intervention and pressuring the involved parties inclusive of Israel and Syria to possibly negotiating with Hizbullah itself. He can also envision the option of the US sanctioning a limited Israeli strike against Hizbullah's missile supply lines and training camps, even if these are located inside Syria. He argues that although such strikes might risk engaging Syria, they would be restricted to purely military targets and remove the justification for a wider Israeli offensive. This alternative fails to take into account, first, current US-Israeli military coordination with respect to Iran and, second, the possibility that Hizbullah might decide to play along, go on the offensive and effectively abort US-Israeli plans for Iran.

Will it help us to understand all this if we see it in the broader context of a region brimming with dangerous forks in perilous roads, most of which lead to violence, whether at the country or regional level or even beyond that? During the past decade, since the turn of the century, we have had the American wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, civil wars in Iraq and Sudan, the second Lebanon war, the Israeli war against Gaza, not to mention lesser battles and skirmishes, and various forms of terrorism and counterterrorism. The sources of all this bloodshed are not what concern me here. In all events, their political, economic and cultural dimensions are too numerous and too intricately intertwined to go into now, although one suspects that many of them have to do with the perpetual state of a region that has failed to explore other options for handling sharp historical contradictions. Rather, what I would like to focus on is Egypt, which is located in the centre of the morass and forever trying to maintain equilibrium and to lessen the extremism and fanaticism of the various parties. From this perspective, I see two interrelated issues. The first is how right Egypt was to choose the strategic option of peace, which not only brought the restoration of its land but also kept Egypt away from that maelstrom of violence and extremism that has shaken the region so drastically over the past decade. The second is the many attempts to drag Egypt into that horrific maelstrom.

During the past few years, various forces have set their sights on Sinai with the purpose of destroying the splendid reputation it had acquired through the development of the southern portion of the peninsula and with the aim of using it as a base to infiltrate into the rest of Egypt. Means towards this end included the tunnels dug beneath the Egyptian-Palestinian border, the mass storming of that border and encroachment into Sinai, the terrorist bombings in Taba, Dahab and Sharm El-Sheikh, and terrorist infiltration and recruitment activities, the most notorious of which was the cell that Hizbullah attempted to plant with the aim of threatening the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. It is difficult to see these actions as isolated developments. Most likely they formed part of a greater plan to prepare a theatre of operations.

Now, I am sure that we have people who are competent and prepared to deal with threats of this nature, these being the people who have thwarted previous bids to propel Egypt towards the precipice of war and violence. However, what concerns me is that our political and intellectual elites seem to have turned inwards, and that the outside world

seems to have vanished from public debate in Egypt. Apart from certain political forces that still speak of the "Egyptian regional role" as though we were still in the 1950s instead of the world of the first decade of the 21st century, there is precious little discussion of the state of the region and its looming perils. In the Egyptian press, television talk shows and other forums you find only a desolate blank where we should be seeing a range of perceptions and ideas on how to deal with some very worrisome regional conditions.

Aside from the occasional accusatory fingers pointed -- rightfully for the most part -- at Israel or the US, analyses of the regional situation, assessments of the challenges it poses to Egyptian interests, and reflections on how Egypt should respond are virtually absent from our agenda. I am aware that our parliamentary and presidential elections are coming up and that both of these merit the close attention of all political forces in our country. But how can we close our eyes to looming dangers and the authors of these dangers who would like nothing better than for us to fall in line submissively and unsuspectingly behind them? I know that our economic situation, which has both discouraging and encouraging aspects, demands our attention. But we allow this to distract us from vital matters connected to Egyptian national security?