

Saltzman Lecture Report
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The Secret War with Iran
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According to Ronen Bergman, the longest ongoing war in the Middle East is a clandestine war currently being waged between Western intelligence agencies (specifically those of the United States and Israel) and the Iranian regime. This underground war has been brewing since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In Bergman's assessment, the Iranian side's capability, originality, and determination have thus far allowed it to emerge largely victorious.

Bergman outlines a number of key moments that shed light on this clandestine war with Iran. First, in February 2007, an Iranian intelligence agent and one of the founders of al-Quds Forces Revolutionary Guards in Lebanon, Ali Reza Asgari, defected from the Iranian regime. Sore form a poor relationship with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that stemmed from their involvement in Iraq in the 1980s, Asgari was willing to offer the Central Intelligence Agency valuable information. Second, in July 2007, there was a mishap at a Syrian-Iranian joint facility in Syria, killing engineers and damaging the facility. Third, in February 2008, Imad Mughniyeh, a senior Hezbollah official, was assassinated.

Fourth, in September 2007, Israeli stealth bombers targeted a Syrian nuclear reactor. Israel knew about the North Korean,

Syrian, and Iranian collaboration on nuclear technology, and, by June 2007, it became evident to Israel that Syria was trying to build a nuclear reactor to produce plutonium to lead to nuclear weaponry. This realization presented Israel with a major dilemma: Should Israel strike Syria's burgeoning nuclear reactor? On one hand, Israel could strike the site, thereby ensuring its destruction. U.S. intelligence, however, advised Israel against the strike, warning Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert that Syrian President Bashar Assad's wounded pride would lead to a full-scale attack on Israel. While this skirmish would likely be won by Israel, it would be accompanied by heavy casualties. On the other hand, Israel could refrain from striking Syria's reactor, instead delivering information about Syria's nuclear program to the United Nations or to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors in the hopes that these multilateral organizations would take action. Ultimately, Olmert decided that he didn't trust the IAEA to halt or slow Syria's nuclear development, and he launched a strike on the reactor that fall.

Bergman then outlined three ways in which Iran pursued its policy objectives throughout this time. First, as an adherent to the principle that a revolution that does not export itself is doomed to collapse from the

inside, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini felt that it was important to try to replicate his brilliant success in other countries. He thus attempted to export the Iranian revolution and encouraging terrorist organizations and insurgencies in neighboring countries. Bergman cited the example of Hamas as a primary target for Revolutionary guards in that they helped extend the range of Hamas' kassam rockets into Israel. According to Bergman, Iran knows that "if kassams reach Tel Aviv, it will totally change the nature of the game."

Second, Khomeini was vehemently opposed to the expansion of Iran as a nuclear power. He witnessed the U.S. bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II, and he did not want to be put in a position to use such a destructive weapon on civilians. Even in face of Iraqi chemical attacks during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, Khomeini did not approve of use of nuclear weapons. After Khomeini's death in 1989, new Iranian leader Ali Khomeini changed Iran's nuclear policy, ordering the renewal of Iran's nuclear project. In 1992, Iran signed a huge contract with Russia to build two nuclear reactors at Busheir and worked with Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan to develop its nuclear program.

Third, from 2002 to 2007, Iran danced a sophisticated tango with the international community. This proved that on one hand, Iran wanted to become a nuclear power and on the other hand, it wanted to avoid becoming a rogue state like North Korea.

Bergman concluded by predicting that Iran will not wage a nuclear attack against Israel. He said that Iran knows that were it to attack Israel, Israel would completely decimate Iran. An Iranian nuclear attack on Israel would mean mutual destruction. So, Bergman asked himself, "Why does Iran invest so much into its

nuclear effort, risking its relationship with the international community?" Bergman believes that the Iranian regime sees nuclear development as an insurance policy, offering it the protection to aid terrorist groups, like Hamas and Hezbollah, without the fear of U.S. intervention or regime change.

Bergman then asked himself if Israel would strike Iran's nuclear facilities. His answer was a reserved, "Yes, but..." In Bergman's eyes, Israel hopes either that international pressure will be enough to dissuade Iran from nuclear development or that "the United States will do the job." But, ultimately, said Bergman, Israel will take military step as a "very, very, very last resort."

Bergman made gloomy predictions based on Israel's weak leadership and on that fact that Iran views the 2006 Israel-Lebanon War as a victory, but, ultimately, he is a proponent of diplomacy. He said that if Iran approaches the United States for talks, the United States should be willing to meet it at the negotiating table. Bergman believes that, in dealing with its neighbors, the West must exhaust every possibility before turning to war.