



In Dealing with Iran, the Best Option for Israel is to Strike First - Diplomatically

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Searching for a solution to curb Iran's nuclear military ambitions, the United States is leading international negotiations likely to come to a head before long. As these discussions have proceeded, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has taken almost every opportunity to express consternation over the possibility of any agreement enshrining a nuclear détente between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. He has good reason for concern, because, as seen from Jerusalem, a truly comprehensive deal that would fully and irreversibly dismantle Iran's potential to develop nuclear weapons does not seem plausible. From Netanyahu's perspective, the partial deals appear as fool's bargains, likely merely to postpone and complicate inevitable military action against Iran's nuclear complex.

For anyone worried that an Israeli military strike against Iran would unleash an incalculable risk of conflicts in Middle East and world politics, this sounds like bad news. Even if a newly negotiated agreement between the United States and Iran comes packaged with some mild sweeteners for Israel, it probably would not be enough to compensate for what Israel views as an existential threat from a hostile Iranian regime. From this perspective, Israel's best current move is to play the spoiler, to search for ways to undermine evolving diplomacy, and if that move fails, send the Israeli Air Force to bomb Iran.

I take Israeli concerns very seriously, but suggest another, better option: preemptive diplomacy rather than a preemptive military strike. Rather than try to forestall a new détente between the United States and Iran – in which America leads the way in trying to contain and divert rather than outright destroy Iran's underlying potential to develop nuclear weapons – Israel could take the lead in forging new alliances in a changed Middle East.

Unilateral Military Strikes or New Israeli Alliances?

A unilateral Israeli military attack on Iran cutting off ongoing negotiations would be a gamble of historic proportions. Regardless of the immediate military outcome, Israel would face the greatest risk since the country's founding of international isolation, possibly including unprecedented condemnation from the United States. The Israelis need more constructive options. One appealing possibility is to take the logic of 'offense dominance' from military doctrine and apply it to diplomacy.

In what political scientists call offense-dominant environments, it is easier to capture territory than to defend it. The side that strikes first has an innate advantage. Normally, diplomacy is considered a defense-dominant approach, because it is easier to use diplomacy to protect the status quo and move incrementally than it is to use it to spur dramatic change in international relations. But there are times and places where diplomacy can be effective on offense, and the 2014 Middle East is one of them. Given the Arab Spring and Syrian War, boiling Shia-Sunni cleavages across the region, and rising tensions between the United States and Saudi
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Arabia, it is arguably easier at this moment to create new alliances than to maintain older ones. In an offense-dominant environment, it is better to move first to define and drive the characteristics of change, than it is to wait for others to initiate and then try to defend, react, or find a niche in a new system defined by others.

So what would be a bold diplomatic move on the part of the Israelis, as bold as a military strike on Iran in terms of its potential to shift calculations in the region? One game-changing possibility is to develop new bargains with the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, or both. Each country has its own concerns about re-positioning in a world shaped by a new U.S.-Iran détente.

The Emirates will need a new source of economic vibrancy, growth, and entrepreneurship to supplement and diversify its current reliance on a large Iranian diaspora community, many of whose members might refocus and return home if Iran moderates. The Qataris would also become even more interested than they are now in pursuing technological development to diversify their economy and boost the seedlings of an entrepreneurship culture. In relation to both of these countries, the Israelis could help. Their nation has a deep entrepreneurial culture, and a fertile environment for technology and innovation that is generating lots of small companies with room to grow. Economically, in short, there are grounds for deeper relations and new bargains between Israel and the Emirates and Qatar.

More broadly, Israel and these Arab countries share the characteristics of small rich countries with ambivalent yet overall positive relationships with the United States. All seek to punch above their weight in the global economy and in regional diplomacy. All worry about the development of a "Shia axis" in a region shaped by intense ruptures between Shia and Sunni Muslims. There are grounds for them to work together diplomatically as well as economically.

Toward a New Relationship with the United States

Whether these particular players could actually finalize deals is less important than the energetic, forward-looking diplomacy that Israel could demonstrate in this effort. Looking to forge new economic and diplomatic alliances, rather than striking out with military means alone, could crack open other regional possibilities for Israel – including a limited deal with Saudi Arabia or a deeper and more open collaboration with Jordan. Such options have been blocked for decades, but if Iran reaches a détente with the United States, Saudi and Jordanian interests will change.

Added benefits from new Israeli regional diplomatic efforts would register in Israel's relationship with the United States, still its most important international tie. As hard as it is for some in both Washington and Jerusalem to acknowledge, the established U.S.-Israel relationship needs to adapt and change. The world polity as a whole is no longer bipolar as it was during the Cold War, and other countries no longer fall into fixed categories as enemies or friends. Military balances of power are now one of many concerns, very important but not always the most dynamic issue. In addition, the generation of American Jews who saw Israel as infallible has passed, along with a generation of Israelis who felt fully beholden to the United States. Going forward, each nation is likely to pursue its own strategies and ties, and Israel needs its own realistic and sustainable diplomatic offensives. To build new relationships with the United States and other world powers along with its regional neighbors, Israeli diplomats should strike first.