

The opinion of an expert

If I were to be asked who best knows about Israeli thinking, I would answer that without question it is Jeffrey Goldberg. He is an indefatigable journalist, capable of having dozens of meetings to ascertain how some Israeli leader or intellectual may think.

He is not neutral, of course; he is pro-Israeli, no ands ifs or buts. When one of them does not agree with the policy of that country, that too is not done halfway.

For my aim, it is important to know the thinking that guides the main political and military leaders of that State.

I feel that I have the authority to have an opinion because I have never been anti-Semitic and I share with him a profound hatred of Nazi-Fascism and the genocide perpetrated against children, women and men, young or aged Jews against whom Hitler, the Gestapo and the Nazis took out their hatred against that people.

For the same reason, I abhor the crimes committed by the fascist government of Netanyahu which kills children, women and men, young and old in the Gaza Strip and on the West Bank.

In his illustrated article "The Point of No Return" that will be printed in The Atlantic journal in September 2010, now available on the Internet, Jeffrey Goldberg starts his more than 40-page paper; I am taking the essential ideas from it in order to enlighten the readers.

"It is possible that at some point in the next 12 months, the imposition of devastating economic sanctions on the Islamic Republic of Iran will persuade its leaders to cease their pursuit of nuclear weapons. [...] It is possible, as well, that "foiling operations" conducted by the intelligence agencies of Israel, the United States, Great Britain, and other Western powers— [...]—will have hindered Iran's progress in some significant way. It is also possible that President Obama, who has said on more than a few occasions that he finds the prospect of a nuclear Iran "unacceptable," will order a military strike against the country's main weapons and uranium-enrichment facilities."

"I am not engaging in a thought exercise, or a one-man war game, when I discuss the plausibility and potential consequences of an Israeli strike on Iran. Israel has twice before successfully attacked and destroyed an enemy's nuclear program. In 1981, Israeli warplanes bombed the Iraqi reactor at Osirak, halting—forever, as it turned out—Saddam Hussein's nuclear ambitions; and in 2007, Israeli planes destroyed a North Korean-built reactor in Syria. An attack on Iran, then, would be unprecedented only in scope and complexity."

"I have been exploring the possibility that such a strike will eventually occur for more than seven years, [...] In the months since then, I have interviewed roughly 40 current and past Israeli decision makers about a military strike, as well as many American and Arab officials. In most of these interviews, I have asked a simple question: what is the percentage chance that Israel will attack the Iranian nuclear program in the near future? Not everyone would answer this question, but a consensus emerged that there is a better than 50 percent chance that Israel will launch a strike by next July. [...] But I tested the consensus by speaking to multiple sources both in and out of government, and of different political parties. Citing the extraordinary sensitivity of the subject, most spoke only reluctantly, and on condition of anonymity. [...] The reasoning offered by Israeli decision makers was uncomplicated: Iran is, at most, one to three years away from having a breakout nuclear capability [...] and the most crucial component of Israeli national-security doctrine, a tenet that dates back to the 1960s [...] is that no regional

adversary should be allowed to achieve nuclear parity with the reborn and still-besieged Jewish state.”

“In our conversation before his swearing-in, Netanyahu would not frame the issue in terms of nuclear parity— [...] Instead, he framed the Iranian program as a threat not only to Israel but to all of Western civilization.”

““...When the wide-eyed believer gets hold of the reins of power and the weapons of mass death, then the world should start worrying, and that’s what is happening in Iran.””

“In our conversation, Netanyahu refused to discuss his timetable for action, or even whether he was considering military preemption of the Iranian nuclear program. [...] Netanyahu’s belief is that Iran is not Israel’s problem alone; it is the world’s problem, and the world, led by the United States, is duty-bound to grapple with it. But Netanyahu does not place great faith in sanctions—not the relatively weak sanctions against Iran recently passed by the United Nations Security Council, nor the more rigorous ones being put in place by the U.S. and its European allies.”

“But, based on my conversations with Israeli decision-makers, this period of forbearance, in which Netanyahu waits to see if the West’s nonmilitary methods can stop Iran, will come to an end this December.”

“The Netanyahu government is already intensifying its analytic efforts not just on Iran, but on a subject many Israelis have difficulty understanding: President Obama. The Israelis are struggling to answer what is for them the most pressing question: are there any circumstances under which President Obama would deploy force to stop Iran from going nuclear? Everything depends on the answer. ”

“Iran demands the urgent attention of the entire international community, and in particular the United States, with its unparalleled ability to project military force. This is the position of many moderate Arab leaders as well. A few weeks ago, in uncommonly direct remarks, the ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to the United States, Yousef al-Otaiba, told me— [...] that his country would support a military strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities. [...] he said. “Small, rich, vulnerable countries in the region do not want to be the ones who stick their finger in the big bully’s eye, if nobody’s going to come to their support.”

“Several Arab leaders have suggested that America’s standing in the Middle East depends on its willingness to confront Iran. They argue self-interestedly that an aerial attack on a handful of Iranian facilities would not be as complicated or as messy as, say, invading Iraq. “This is not a discussion about the invasion of Iran,” one Arab foreign minister told me. “We are hoping for the pinpoint striking of several dangerous facilities. America could do this very easily.”

“Barack Obama has said any number of times that he would find a nuclear Iran “unacceptable.” [...] A nuclear Iran would be a game-changing situation, not just in the Middle East, but around the world. Whatever remains of our nuclear nonproliferation framework, I think, would begin to disintegrate. You would have countries in the Middle East who would see the potential need to also obtain nuclear weapons.”

“But the Israelis are doubtful that a man who positioned himself as the antithesis of George W. Bush, author of invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq, would launch a preemptive attack on a Muslim nation.”

“We all watched his speech in Cairo,” a senior Israeli official told me, referring to the June 2009 speech in which Obama attempted to reset relations with Muslims by stressing American cooperativeness and respect for Islam. “We don’t believe that he is the sort of person who would launch a daring strike on Iran. We are afraid he would see a policy of containing a nuclear Iran rather than attacking it.”

““Bush was two years ago, but the Iranian program was the same and the intent was the same,” the Israeli official told me. “So I don’t personally expect Obama to be more Bush than Bush.”

"If the Israelis reach the firm conclusion that Obama will not, under any circumstances, launch a strike on Iran, then the countdown will begin for a unilateral Israeli attack.

"a strike on Iran, Israeli intelligence officials believe, could provoke all-out retaliation by Iran's Lebanese subsidiary, Hezbollah, which now possesses, by most intelligence estimates, as many as 45,000 rockets—at least three times as many as it had in the summer of 2006, during the last round of fighting between the group and Israel.)

"...Netanyahu is not unique in his understanding of this challenge; several of the prime ministers who preceded him cast Iran's threat in similarly existential terms. [...] "He has a deep sense of his role in Jewish history," Michael Oren, Israel's ambassador to the United States, told me."

Jeffrey Goldberg goes on for several pages to tell the story of Netanyahu's father, Ben-Zion, whom he considers to be the most outstanding historian in the world on the subject of the Spanish Inquisition and other important merits, and who recently celebrated his 100th birthday.

"Benjamin Netanyahu is not known in most quarters for his pliability on matters concerning Palestinians, though he has been trying lately to meet at least some of Barack Obama's demands that he move the peace process forward."

At the end of this part of his article, Goldberg carries on with the analysis of the complex situation. At times he is rather tough analyzing a 2001 commentary by the former president of Iran, Hashemi-Rafsanjani, in which he is certainly speaking about a bomb that would destroy Israel; a threat that was criticized even by the left-wing forces that are Netanyahu's enemies.

"The challenges posed by a nuclear Iran are more subtle than a direct attack, Netanyahu told me. [...] 'Iran's militant proxies would be able to fire rockets and engage in other terror activities while enjoying a nuclear umbrella. [...] Instead of being a local event, however painful, it becomes a global one. Second, this development would embolden Islamic militants far and wide, on many continents, who would believe that this is a providential sign, that this fanaticism is on the ultimate road to triumph.."

" "You'd create a great sea change in the balance of power in our area," he went on.

"Other Israeli leaders believe that the mere threat of a nuclear attack by Iran—combined with the chronic menacing of Israel's cities by the rocket forces of Hamas and Hezbollah—will progressively undermine the country's ability to retain its most creative and productive citizens.. [...] 'The real test for us is to make Israel such an attractive place, such a cutting-edge place in human society, education, culture, science, quality of life, that even American Jewish young people want to come here."

"Patriotism in Israel runs very high, according to numerous polls, and it seemed unlikely to me that mere fear of Iran could drive Israel's Jews to seek shelter elsewhere. But one leading proponent of an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, Ephraim Sneh, a former general and former deputy defense minister, is convinced that if Iran crossed the nuclear threshold, the very idea of Israel would be endangered. "These people are good citizens, and brave citizens, but the dynamics of life are such that if someone has a scholarship for two years at an American university and the university offers him a third year, the parents will say, 'Go ahead, remain there,'" Sneh told me when I met with him in his office outside of Tel Aviv not long ago. "If someone finishes a Ph.D. and they are offered a job in America, they might stay there. It will not be that people are running to the airport, [...] The bottom line is that we would have an accelerated brain drain. And an Israel that is not based on entrepreneurship, that is not based on excellence, will not be the Israel of today."

"One Monday evening in early summer, I sat in the office of the decidedly non-goyishe Rahm Emanuel, the White House chief of staff, and listened to several National Security Council officials he had gathered at his conference table explain—in so many words—why the Jewish state should trust the non-Jewish president of the United States to stop Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold. "

"One of those at the table, Ben Rhodes, a deputy national-security adviser who served as the lead author of the recent "National Security Strategy for the United States" as well as of the president's conciliatory Cairo speech, suggested that Iran's nuclear program was a clear threat to American security, and that the Obama administration responds to national-security threats in the manner of other administrations. "We are coordinating a multifaceted strategy to increase pressure on Iran, but that doesn't mean we've removed any option from the table," Rhodes said. "This president has shown again and again that when he believes it is necessary to use force to protect American national-security interests, he has done so. We're not going to address hypotheticals about when and if we would use military force, but I think we've made it clear that we aren't removing the option of force from any situation in which our national security is affected."

"...Emanuel, whose default state is exasperation [...] (A former Bush administration official told me that his president faced the opposite problem: Bush, bogged down by two wars and believing that Iran wasn't that close to crossing the nuclear threshold, opposed the use of force against Iran's program, and made his view clear, "but no one believed him)."

"At one point, I put forward the idea that for abundantly obvious reasons, few people would believe Barack Obama would open up a third front in the greater Middle East. One of the officials responded heatedly, "What have we done that would allow you to reach the conclusion that we think that a nuclear Iran would represent a tolerable situation?"

"Obama administration officials, particularly in the Pentagon, have several times signaled unhappiness at the possibility of military preemption. In April, the undersecretary of defense for policy, Michele Flournoy, told reporters that military force against Iran was "off the table in the near term." She later backtracked, but Admiral Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has also criticized the idea of attacking Iran. [...] "In an area that's so unstable right now, we just don't need more of that."

"...President Obama has by no means ruled out counterproliferation by force.. [...] Gary Samore, the National Security Council official who oversees the administration's counterproliferation agenda, told me that the Israelis agree with American assessments that Iran's uranium-enrichment program is plagued with problems."

"...we can measure, based on the IAEA reports, that the Iranians are not doing well," Samore said. "The particular centrifuge machines they're running are based on an inferior technology. They are running into some technical difficulties, partly because of the work we've done to deny them access to foreign components. When they make the parts themselves, they are making parts that don't have quality control."

"Dennis Ross, the former Middle East peace negotiator who is currently a senior National Security Council official, said during the meeting that he believes the Israelis now understand that American-instigated measures have slowed Iran's progress, and that the administration is working to convince the Israelis—and other parties in the region—that the sanctions strategy "has a chance of working."

"The president has said he hasn't taken any options off the table, but let's take a look at why we think this strategy could work," [...] Last June, when they hadn't responded to our bilateral outreach, the president said that we would take stock by September."

"Ross [...] the sanctions Iran now faces may affect the regime's thinking. "The sanctions are going to cut across the board. They are taking place in the context of Iranian mismanagement—the Iranians are going to have to cut [food and fuel] subsidies; they already have public alienation; they have division in the elites, and between the elites and the rest of the country."

"One question no administration official seems eager to answer is this: what will the United States do if sanctions fail? Several Arab officials complained to me that the Obama administration has not

communicated its intentions to them, even generally.”

“Obama’s voters like it when the administration shows that it doesn’t want to fight Iran, but this is not a domestic political issue,” the foreign minister said. “Iran will continue on this reckless path, unless the administration starts to speak unreasonably. The best way to avoid striking Iran is to make Iran think that the U.S. is about to strike Iran. We have to know the president’s intentions on this matter. We are his allies.” (According to two administration sources, this issue caused tension between President Obama and his recently dismissed director of national intelligence, Admiral Dennis Blair. According to these sources, Blair, who was said to put great emphasis on the Iranian threat, told the president that America’s Arab allies needed more reassurance. Obama reportedly did not appreciate the advice.)”

“In Israel, of course, officials expend enormous amounts of energy to understand President Obama, despite the assurances they have received from Emanuel, Ross, and others.”

“Not long ago, the chief of Israeli military intelligence, Major General Amos Yadlin, paid a secret visit to Chicago to meet with Lester Crown, the billionaire whose family owns a significant portion of General Dynamics, the military contractor. Crown [...] “I share with the Israelis the feeling that we certainly have the military capability and that we have to have the will to use it. The rise of Iran is not in the best interest of the U.S.”

““I support the president,” Crown said. “But I wish [administration officials] were a little more outgoing in the way they have talked. I would feel more comfortable if I knew that they had the will to use military force, as a last resort. You cannot threaten someone as a bluff. There has to be a will to do it.”

“Several officials even asked if I considered Obama to be an anti-Semite. I answered this question by quoting Abner Mikva, the former congressman, federal judge, and mentor to Obama, who famously said in 2008, “I think when this is all over, people are going to say that Barack Obama is the first Jewish president.” I explained that Obama has been saturated with the work of Jewish writers, legal scholars, and thinkers, and that a large number of his friends, supporters, and aides are Jewish. But philo-Semitism does not necessarily equal sympathy for Netanyahu’s Likud Party—certainly not among American Jews, who are, like the president they voted for in overwhelming numbers, generally supportive of a two-state solution, and dubious about Jewish settlement of the West Bank.”

“Rahm Emanuel suggested that the administration is trying to thread a needle: providing “unshakeable” support for Israel; protecting it from the consequences of an Iranian nuclear bomb; but pushing it toward compromise with the Palestinians. [...] he past six Israeli prime ministers—including Netanyahu, who during his first term in the late 1990s, to his father’s chagrin, compromised with the Palestinians—to buttress his case. “Rabin, Peres, Netanyahu, Barak, Sharon, Olmert—every one of them pursued some form of a negotiated settlement, which would have been in Israel’s own strategic interest,” he said. “There have been plenty of other threats while successive Israeli governments have pursued a peace process.”

“...Israel should consider carefully whether a military strike would be worth the trouble it would unleash. “I’m not sure that given the time line, whatever the time line is, that whatever they did, they wouldn’t stop” the nuclear program, he said. “They would be postponing.”

“It was then that I realized that, on some subjects, the Israelis and Americans are still talking past each other.”

“IN MY CONVERSATIONS with former Israeli air-force generals and strategists, the prevalent tone was cautious. Many people I interviewed were ready, on condition of anonymity, to say why an attack on Iran’s nuclear sites would be difficult for Israel. And some Israeli generals, like their American colleagues, questioned the very idea of an attack. “Our time would be better spent lobbying Barack Obama to do this, rather than trying this ourselves,” one general told me. “We are very good at this kind of operation, but it is a big stretch for us. The Americans can do this with a minimum of difficulty,

by comparison. This is too big for us.”

“These planes would have to return home quickly, in part because Israeli intelligence believes that Iran would immediately order Hezbollah to fire rockets at Israeli cities, and Israeli air-force resources would be needed to hunt Hezbollah rocket teams.”

“...in the event of a unilateral Israeli strike on Iran, his mission would be to combat Hezbollah rocket forces. [...]to keep Hezbollah in reserve until Iran can cross the nuclear threshold.

“...Hezbollah “lost a lot of his men. [...] That is one reason we have had four years of quiet. What has changed in four years is that Hezbollah has increased its missile capability, but we have increased our capabilities as well.” He concluded by saying, in reference to a potential Israeli strike on Iran, “Our readiness means that Israel has freedom of action.”

“America, too, would look complicit in an Israeli attack, even if it had not been forewarned. The assumption—often, but not always, correct—that Israel acts only with the approval of the United States is a feature of life in the Middle East, and it is one the Israelis say they are taking into account. I spoke with several Israeli officials who are grappling with this question, among others: what if American intelligence learns about Israeli intentions hours before the scheduled launch of an attack? “It is a nightmare for us,” one of these officials told me. “What if President Obama calls up Bibi and says, ‘We know what you’re doing. Stop immediately.’ Do we stop? We might have to. A decision has been made that we can’t lie to the Americans about our plans. We don’t want to inform them beforehand. This is for their sake and for ours. So what do we do? These are the hard questions.”

“Many Israelis think the Iranians are building Auschwitz. We have to let them know that we have destroyed Auschwitz, or we have to let them know that we tried and failed.”

“There are, of course, Israeli leaders who believe that attacking Iran is too risky. [...]“We don’t want politicians to put us in a bad position because of the word Shoah,” one general said.”

“After staring at the photograph of the Israeli air-force flyover of Auschwitz more than a dozen different times in more than a dozen different offices, I came to see the contradiction at its core. If the Jewish physicists who created Israel’s nuclear arsenal could somehow have ripped a hole in the space-time continuum and sent a squadron of fighters back to 1942,...

“Benjamin Netanyahu feels, for reasons of national security, that if sanctions fail, he will be forced to take action. But an Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities, successful or not, may cause Iran to redouble its efforts—this time with a measure of international sympathy—to create a nuclear arsenal. And it could cause chaos for America in the Middle East. [...]Peres sees the Iranian nuclear program as potentially catastrophic, [...]When I asked if he believed in a military option, he said, “Why should I declare something like that?”

“Based on months of interviews, I have come to believe that the administration knows it is a near-certainty that Israel will act against Iran soon if nothing or no one else stops the nuclear program; [...]Earlier this year, I agreed with those, including many Israelis, Arabs—and Iranians—who believe there is no chance that Obama would ever resort to force to stop Iran; I still don’t believe there is a great chance he will take military action in the near future—for one thing, the Pentagon is notably unenthusiastic about the idea. But Obama is clearly seized by the issue. [...]Denis McDonough, the chief of staff of the National Security Council, told me, “What you see in Iran is the intersection of a number of leading priorities of the president, who sees a serious threat to the global nonproliferation regime, a threat of cascading nuclear activities in a volatile region, and a threat to a close friend of the United States, Israel. I think you see the several streams coming together, which accounts for why it is so important to us.”

“When I asked Peres what he thought of Netanyahu’s effort to make Israel’s case to the Obama

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administration, he responded [...]his country should know its place, and that it was up to the American president, and only the American president, to decide in the end how best to safeguard the future of the West. The story was about his mentor, David Ben-Gurion.

““Shortly after John F. Kennedy was elected president, Ben-Gurion met him at the Waldorf-Astoria” in New York, Peres told me. “After the meeting, Kennedy accompanied Ben-Gurion to the elevator and said, ‘Mr. Prime Minister, I want to tell you, I was elected because of your people, so what can I do for you in return?’ Ben-Gurion was insulted by the question. He said, ‘What you can do is be a great president of the United States. You must understand that to have a great president of the United States is a great event.’”

“Peres went on to explain what he saw as Israel’s true interest. “We don’t want to win over the president,” he said. “We want the president to win.”

“Jeffrey Goldberg”

“Jeffrey Mark Goldberg is an American-Israeli journalist. He is one of the writers and staff journalists on The Atlantic journal. Previously he worked for The New Yorker. Goldberg mainly writes on international subjects, preferring the Middle East and Africa. Some have called him the most influential journalist-blogger on matters dealing with Israel.”

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