

## **Rattling the Cage: Against a preemptive Holocaust**

Larry Derfner, THE JERUSALEM POST

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Almost imperceptibly, the debate in Israel over what to do about Iran's nuclear development has gone over the edge. The unthinkable is now not only thinkable, it's speakable, it's writeable, it's doable. In the last few weeks or so, it has become acceptable, legitimate, to argue for an Israeli nuclear first strike to knock out Iran's nuclear facilities.

This ultimate escalation in the debate happened mainly, I think, because it came to be widely understood that Iran's nuclear operations are probably too well buried, hidden, defended and widespread to take out with conventional weapons. Destroying them the "normal" way might also require a ground invasion, which, after what's happened in Iraq, doesn't appeal to many people. Moreover, in another outgrowth of the debacle in Iraq, it now seems unlikely that President Bush, or his successor, will be politically able to go to war against Iran.

So, as most Israelis seem convinced that Iran will inevitably nuke Israel once it gets the capability, which is expected to happen sometime within the next decade, the Israeli nuclear option has made its public debut.

IF YOU READ the "talkbacks" on *The Jerusalem Post* or *Haaretz* Web sites, not to mention the radical right-wing blogs, the idea of nuking Iran has been boiling in the minds of more than a few people, Jews and gentiles, for a long time.

But this idea has now traveled beyond the boundaries of the crackpot Right, and is reportedly on the menu of options for dealing with Iran that the IDF is preparing to put at the government's disposal. According to *The Sunday Times* of London on January 7, the Israeli Air Force is training to launch "low-yield nuclear 'bunker-busters,'" or "mini-nukes," against the facilities Iran has buried under 70 feet of concrete because there's no conventional way to wipe them out.

The military sources quoted in the story spoke of these as surgical strikes in which the nukes would explode deep underground, thus limiting the radioactive fallout.

That's good to know. After the IDF's performance last summer in Lebanon, when it couldn't provide many of its fighting men with the most basic equipment or even food and water, we should all sleep soundly knowing that when Israel fires its nukes at Iran's nukes-in-the-making, wherever they all might be, everything will be under control.

Then, in *The Jerusalem Post* on the Friday before last, Benny Morris, one of Israel's leading historians and possibly the world's number one historian of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, made a barely-veiled appeal for Israel to nuke Iran and thereby save itself from what he sees as certain destruction. This is really depressing. I have always admired Morris's work as a historian for its combination of boldness and balance, and he may still be an outstanding historian, but as a political commentator he is implicitly advocating an act of unimaginable evil, of monstrosity.

IN HIS essay "This holocaust will be different," Morris declares it a *fait accompli* that Iran will destroy Israel with nuclear weapons, and he maintains that the only way to prevent this would be for Israel to nuke Iran's nuclear facilities first. He points out that some of these facilities "are in or near major cities," then asks a rhetorical question about Israel's "incompetent" and "demoralized" leadership: "Would they have the stomach for this? Would their determination to save Israel extend to preemptively killing millions of Iranians and, in effect, destroying Iran?" His answer is no, and, just slightly between the lines, he's saying that the answer should be yes: that this country's leaders should have the stomach and determination to save Israel by killing millions of Iranians and, in effect, destroying Iran.

If the future was as knowable as Morris evidently thinks it is, if it really was guaranteed, a *fait accompli*, an event ordained in advance by some higher power, that Iran was going to launch nuclear weapons at Israel, then I would agree - we should nuke them first, even if it means killing millions of innocent Iranians.

But, of course, the future isn't knowable - even by people who know and understand the past. Yet a lot of Israelis, not just Benny Morris, have become so unhinged by Iran's nuclear program and Ahmadinejad's threats that they can only imagine one possible future, and it is Israel's extermination. So for them, Israel has the natural right to do whatever's necessary to prevent that future from occurring, and if the only thing that will do it is a nuclear attack on Iran, then a nuclear attack on Iran it must be. After all, the overwhelming consensus here is that a nuclear Iran is a risk that Israel cannot allow itself to live with.

MY OWN view is that while a nuclear Iran is obviously a danger, and something that should be strongly resisted by diplomatic means, I don't think Iran is going to nuke Israel because I think Iran's leaders understand what the price would be - the certain annihilation of Iran and the deaths of many, most, or all of its 69 million people - and neither Ahmadinejad nor the mullahs are willing to pay it.

Why do I think this? Because Stalin and Mao had hydrogen bombs that could have blown up the world, and they were far, far more bloodthirsty than the Iranians, and they weren't only ideologically insane but maybe clinically insane as well, yet they never pushed the button. As crazy as they were, they weren't that crazy.

The Iranians, for all their genocidal talk, have never by their deeds shown anything remotely approaching the fanatic will to actual genocide that Stalin and Mao demonstrated. The Iranians have weapons of mass destruction - chemical and possibly biological, too. They also have missiles that can reach anywhere in Israel. If they are so bent on wiping us out, even if it means their own extermination, why haven't they showered tiny little Israel with WMD-armed missiles? The answer, again, is that while the Iranians are crazy, they're not that crazy.

I believe that even if they think they could take out Israel with a first strike before Israel could retaliate, they realize that the US would immediately nuke Iran to rubble, and would have the backing of the world's other nuclear powers. The US wouldn't necessarily do it to avenge Israel, either.

If the US president were a raging anti-Semite who'd become deliriously happy over Israel's destruction, he'd still destroy Iran. If Iran nuked Israel, the US president, backed by every other nuclear power, would push the button on Iran for the purpose of protecting America and the rest of the world from a country that, by doing the unthinkable, by using its doomsday weapon on an enemy, had proven itself too dangerous for the world to live with. By nuking Israel, Iran would become the rabid killer dog that has to be shot before it kills again.

BUT THEN I may be wrong. After all, I don't know the future, either. Maybe Iran really is as crazy as Benny Morris and a lot of other Israelis say.

How can Israel take that risk? Because the risk of living with a nuclear Iran is much, much, much smaller than the risk involved in nuking Iran first. If Israel uses its nuclear weapons against Iran, which is nearly 80 times Israel's size, the very least that would likely happen is that Israel would immediately be showered by Iranian missiles carrying chemical and possibly biological weapons.

Another possibility is that some other nuclear power, acting on the rabid dog principle, would nuke Israel. A further possibility is that an Israeli nuclear strike on Iran would be the beginning of the end of the whole world.

What's not just a possibility but a very strong probability, though, is that since some of Iran's nuclear facilities "are in or near major cities," Morris is absolutely right: Millions of Iranians would be killed.

Let me repeat that: Millions of Iranians would be killed. By Israel. By Israel acting not in response to an attack, but in response to general threats of a future attack.

What would such an act be? It would be genocide. It would be a holocaust.

Those who think they can see into the future might try to call it a "preemptive holocaust." But a holocaust it would be.

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