

IS A NEW OPERATION BABYLON IMMINENT?

*“By the waters
The waters
Of Babylon*

*We lay down and wept
And wept
For thee Zion”*

Song Babylon
Don McLean
1971¹

“If and when Jerusalem acts militarily against Tehran to stop its nuclear ambitions, it will likely involve four different fronts, as Iranian-backed groups in Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza would immediately launch reprisal missile and rocket attacks on Israel. For now, however, only one thing is certain. Tehran has inserted the nuclear key into the gate lock of Armageddon and is beginning to twist it open.”

Mark Toth²

“Lt. Gen. Herzi Halevi, the Israeli military’s chief of staff, stated on Tuesday that if Iran continues to develop its nuclear program, Israel would have no choice but to stage a pre-emptive attack.”

Mohammad al-Kassim
*The Jerusalem Post*³

¹ The lyrics are from McLean’s haunting lyrics on the best-selling *American Pie* album.

² Mark Toth, “Is Iran unlocking the gates of Armageddon?” *THE HILL*, (Opinion piece), May 25, 2023.

³ Mohammad al-Kassim, “Mounting tensions between Israel, Iran herald possible military showdown,” *The Jerusalem Post*, May 25, 2023.

In my college classes—at least once a semester, no matter which class I was teaching—I would try to engage my students in a discussion concerning the world’s five hottest trouble spots at the time. By “hot” I meant tensions that could easily break out into a broader war. Regardless of the year, or global circumstances, there was one constant “hot spot” that appeared on our top five list: a potential crisis in the Middle East involving the Jewish state of Israel.

In case you haven’t noticed, over the past few days, all potential contenders in the Middle East have ratcheted up their warlike rhetoric and more: Israeli military officials are openly threatening a military strike on Iran and, in an unusual move, publicly announced their ability to penetrate Iranian airspace; Hezbollah—Iran’s Shiite ally entrenched in Lebanon on Israel’s northern border—recently conducted computer simulated exercises targeting Israeli border settlements; Iranian officials at home and abroad continue to spew a constant stream of bellicose threats against Israel and showing off new missiles; trouble continues to brew on the contested Temple Mount in Jerusalem; and Israeli aircraft periodically pound targets in Gaza and Syria in a tit-for-tat response to missile launches by numerous terrorist groups.⁴

I read an interesting article this morning that brought the issue of these building tensions in the Middle East—and my memory of those classroom discussions—to the forefront once again. The title caught my eye: “Is Iran unlocking the gates to Armageddon?”⁵

A catchy title for sure.

The article concerns a ticking clock decision approaching for Israeli politicians, policymakers, and war planners as Iran—its sworn enemy—moves ever closer to a weaponized nuclear program. The problem: in June 2022, Iran reportedly had amassed 95 pounds of highly enriched uranium (to a 60 percent purity level), well beyond the amount needed for a nuclear weapon. Since then, the Biden administration has (in my view) completely ignored Tehran’s weapons buildup, issued empty threats, and has tried to placate Israel with shallow promises.

⁴ *Ibid.*; Toth, “Is Iran unlocking the gates; and Julia Shapiro, “Iran shows off new ballistic missile,” *THE HILL*, May 25, 2023; among others.

⁵ Toth, “Is Iran unlocking the gates.”

What is the situation in the Middle East now? We have completely alienated Saudi Arabia and pushed them closer to China and Russia, allowed China to gain a diplomatic foothold in the region, let a Syrian dictator off the hook, and that does not include our bungled withdrawal from Afghanistan. But worst of all, Washington has basically turned a blind eye to recent weaponization efforts in Iran. Now, according to a February 2023 report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to the United Nations Security Council, Iran has amassed a stockpile of 193 pounds of enriched U-235 (enough for three full-scale atomic warheads), as well as demonstrating a capacity to enrich U-235 to 83.7 percent (and an ability to reach 90 percent).⁶ It also is likely that Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, is helping Iran improve its nuclear weaponization program in exchange for the Tehran mullahs providing drones and other military equipment for use in Ukraine.

Hence the uptick in activity and hostile rhetoric. Putting on my analyst's hat for a second, it seems to me there are three possible explanations for what we are seeing today in the Middle East. First, things are just as they seem. The regional powers by their posturing are steadily drifting toward a costly regional conflict that threatens to draw in other outside powers (including the U.S.). This explanation, however, violates James Akers "first principle"—things are never as they seem.

Secondly, Israeli public spinmeisters are pulling out all stops to gather support from U.S. officials in a bid to forestall the need to conduct future military activity or a full-scale cyber-attack. At the present time, Israel has a clear technological advantage over its regional adversaries in terms of drones, AI,⁷ swarms, high-precision weaponry, and—the ultimate ace up their sleeve—between 80-400 nuclear warheads sitting atop *Jericho*-class intercontinental range ballistic missiles.⁸ But this window of advantage may be closing rapidly.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See, among others, Dan Williams, "Israel aims to be 'AI superpower', advance autonomous weapons," *Reuters*, May 21, 2023. The article talks about state-owned Israel Aerospace Industries unveiling an autonomous intelligence-gathering submarine which had already completed "thousands of hours" of operations.

⁸ Israel maintains a policy of "deliberate ambiguity," never admitting or denying its possession of nuclear weapons. The "Samson Option" refers to Israel's deterrence strategy of massive retaliation with nuclear weapons as a "last

Moreover, the widespread deployment of any of these systems would lead to unforeseen consequences. Perhaps, as an alternative explanation, the Israelis are just buying time before they strike with a vengeance at a future opportune moment.

A third possible explanation is that all parties in the region are engaged in a game of high stakes geopolitical poker, replete with sophisticated and complicated bluffing strategies.

I tend to favor the latter explanation.

To be sure, the Israelis can act in circumstances where they perceive an existential threat. On June 7, 1981, for example, Israel's Air Force (IAF) conducted *Operation Opera*—also known as *Operation Babylon*—which destroyed an unfinished Iraqi nuclear reactor located 17 kilometers (11 miles) southeast of Baghdad. The surprise attack was conducted by a flight of IAF F-16 fighter aircraft, with an escort of F-15s, and took out the *Osirak* reactor deep inside Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Israel's preventative strike, and Israeli government statements after the attack, established the so-called “Begin Doctrine,”⁹ a foreign policy assertion upholding the Jewish state's right to conduct such counter-proliferation strikes in the future to prevent regional enemies' capability to produce weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons.

The doctrine remains a central feature of Israeli security planning.

Using the Begin Doctrine on September 6, 2007, for example, Israeli aircraft hit a suspected nuclear reactor site located in the Deir ez-Zor region of Syria (*Operation Outside the Box* or *Operation Orchard*).¹⁰

resort' against an invading enemy. See, among others, Hans Kristensen and Robert Norris, “Israeli nuclear weapons, 2014,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 70 (6):97-115.

⁹ The doctrine—which traces its roots to *Operation Damocles* in the early 1960s—was enunciated by then-Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin following the attack, which he labeled an act of “anticipatory self-defense at its best.”

¹⁰ See, among others, Uzi Mahnaimi, “Israelis ‘blew apart Syrian nuclear cache,’” *The Sunday Times* (London), Sep. 16, 2007.

Can Israel conduct such a pre-emptive aerial strike against Iranian nuclear facilities in today's world? It would be much more difficult. In 1981, for example, Israel's aircraft had to destroy a single target (a reactor being rebuilt) with a 2,000-mile round trip. IAF aircraft had the element of surprise. By contrast, to eliminate Iran's nuclear program today, the aircraft (or drone swarms) would have to hit at least seven known nuclear sites with some of them located as far as 1,500 miles east of Tel Aviv, including Iran's reported atomic test site in the Lutz Desert. Each of these sites are protected by Russian-provided surface-to-air missile sites and some of the locations—such as the Bushehr site—presumably have Russian technicians present. (The *Osirak* reactor only had a handful of French technicians on site).¹¹

The Israeli strike in 1981 was followed by broad international condemnation and the diplomatic environment today, I would respectfully suggest, is far more hostile to the Jewish state.

In 1981, Israel's Prime Minister could count on a mostly unified public consensus endorsing such a bold act. Today, Prime Minister Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu presides over a fractious political coalition amid widespread popular discontent.

Moreover, whereas Israel could count on U.S. support in 1981, they are far less certain of American backing for any such initiative today.

In 2010, Israel extended the Begin Doctrine to include digital pre-emptive measures. In this vein, during my history courses at the College of the Ozarks, I suggested that one of the true turning points of the post-Cold War era was the first use of a government-sponsored cyberweapon called *Stuxnet*.¹² The weapon was amazingly effective, both as a computer worm and *rootkit* to hide malicious files, it targeted foreign-made supervisory control and data acquisition systems (SCADA)

¹¹ Toth, "Is Iran unlocking."

¹² Since the attack in 2010, *Stuxnet* has been extensively studied by numerous government cybersecurity experts and investigative journalists. See, among others, Kim Zetter, *Countdown to Zero Day: Stuxnet and the Launch of the World's First Digital Weapon*, New York: Crown Publishing, 2014; Steve Kroft, "Stuxnet: Computer Worm opens new wave of warfare," *60 Minutes (CBS)*, Mar 4, 2012; and Ralph Langer, "Ralph Langer: Cracking Stuxnet, a 21st century cyber weapon," *TED*, Mar 2011.

essential to centrifuges at Iranian nuclear facilities (reportedly destroying one-fifth of Iran's centrifuges and setting back Tehran's Iranian nuclear weapons program for years). Although neither country has publicly acknowledged their role in creating the weapon, it is generally recognized that it was the result of *Operation Olympic Games*—a joint U.S.-Israeli collaborative effort beginning as early as 2005.¹³

How did it work? At Iran's Natanz nuclear enrichment facility the Iranian engineers saw screens that gave normal readouts even as the critical centrifuges were spinning to self-destruction.

They trusted their screens too much.

And the unintended consequences? *Stuxnet* succeeded in setting back Tehran's nuclear program, but in its wake launched a string of global government investigations, international recriminations, Iranian revenge attacks and copy-cat malware programs like *Duqu*, *Flame* and others. In the years since, increasingly sophisticated cyberattacks and ransomware attacks have become an accepted reality of modern-day life in the Middle East and elsewhere.

A Pandora's technological box was opened.

Since *Stuxnet*, we live in a different world.

I suspect that a future Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear program will have the same sort of wide-ranging unintended consequences that accompanied its strike on the *Osirak* reactor in 1981 and *Stuxnet* in 2010.

But then again, it is an existential matter for Jerusalem.

It is only one of many foreign policy considerations for us.

Stay tuned.

¹³ "Confirmed: US and Israel created Stuxnet, lost control of it," *Ars Technica*, Jun 2021; Ellen Nakashima, "Stuxnet was work of U.S. and Israeli experts, officials say," *The Washington Post*, Jun 2, 2012.