

**THE  TIMES****Nuclear Iran need not mean Middle East war**

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February 22 2012 12:01AM

## Even if Tehran does get the bomb it will not be in its interests – or Israel's – to provoke a military showdown

Some problems can be solved; others we just have to learn to live with. One weird and sometimes dangerous feature of modern politics is the confusion between the two. Many questions with relatively straightforward technical answers are presented by governments as if they are insoluble — how to create a stable European currency, reduce unemployment or control global warming, for example. Then, perhaps to compensate for their impotence over such mundane issues, politicians promise to resolve much more complex geopolitical or moral challenges that really have no solution.

The clearest and most dangerous case of this confusion is the world's response to Iran's nuclear programme. Western leaders, from Barack Obama and David Cameron downwards, have stated that they would “never” allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon, while Israeli politicians are increasingly open in their threats to “take out” Iran's nuclear programme by military force.

But what if there is no way to do this? What if Iran can withstand US and European economic sanctions, while an Israeli “military option” simply does not exist? The standard response is that a nuclear-armed Iran would be an “existential threat” that Israel could not tolerate. The US and Israel would therefore be forced to destroy Iran's nuclear programme. But why should we assume that Israel could do this, even with unstinting help from the US?

If Israel were to bomb Iran, it would probably find that the most important facilities had already been secured in impenetrable underground bunkers. And those installations that were vulnerable to Israeli bombs would quickly be rebuilt, as Iran mobilised to defend itself against future attacks by acquiring a nuclear arsenal. If mastering nuclear technology is possible for impoverished, backward

and isolated failed states such as North Korea and Pakistan, it seems unlikely that it would be beyond the reach of a relatively advanced, well-educated and wealthy country such as Iran.

The only sure way to prevent the ayatollahs from getting their hands on a nuclear weapon would be to invade Iran and occupy it indefinitely with millions of ground troops, as General Martin Dempsey, the US Chief of Staff, admitted in congressional testimony last week.

If this is so, a nuclear-armed Iran may be one of those insoluble problems that Israel and the world simply have to learn to live with — just as South Korea and Japan have learnt to live with their even more belligerent nuclear-armed neighbour in Pyongyang and India has learnt to live with a nuclear-armed Pakistan, where the Government sometimes behaves like an al-Qaeda franchise.

The world will then need Cold War-style deterrence. And the country most in need of Western deterrence in the next year or so is Israel, not Iran.

To see why, consider how a war in the Middle East might start this year. A common view is that Iran might retaliate against economic sanctions by closing the Strait of Hormuz, which carry a quarter of the world's oil trade. That would inevitably provoke a US and European military response, backed by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, which in turn would provide cover for the US or Israel to attack Iranian nuclear installations. For this very reason, Iran is unlikely to fire the first shot or to provoke the world by trying to interfere with the oil trade.

Iran, in fact, has strong reasons for wanting to keep the oil moving. It badly needs the income from sales to China and other Asian countries that refuse to participate in Western sanctions. Iran's oil income would dwindle almost to zero in the event of any military disturbance in the Gulf. Even more importantly, Iran wants to preserve the status quo for as long as possible to get on with its nuclear programme. The only possible reason for the ayatollahs to start a war in the foreseeable future would be to deliberately provoke US or Israeli retaliation and thereby unite Iran's long-suffering citizens. But even if this were the intention, Iran would be much better off continuing to goad Israel with its nuclear programme, rather than becoming the first belligerent and losing the moral high ground of self-defence.

If a war in the Gulf starts, therefore, it will almost certainly be Israel that fires the first shot or drops the first bomb. The key question is why Israel should want to start an armed conflict. Israel can presumably be treated as a rational player in this chess game. So how would its vital interests be affected by attacking Iran? The answer is catastrophically.

An attack might or might not delay Iran's nuclear capacity for a year or so, but it would also guarantee Iran's withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, greatly speeding up the nuclear build-up, quite possibly with intensified

covert co-operation from North Korea and perhaps China or Russia. And an Israeli attack would almost certainly precipitate a much wider Middle East conflict, further destabilising Iraq and Afghanistan and undermining the rebellion in Syria, but enlisting Saudi Arabia and even Egypt in opposition to Israeli and Western aggression against Muslim states.

An attack on Iran would do far more damage to Israel's medium-term interests than it might have in the past, because of the upheaval in the Middle East. The war in Iraq and the Arab Spring have set off a period of enormous political flux and nobody knows how these political transformations will evolve. The Israelis have turned out to be just as clueless as Western governments and intelligence services about these events. But one thing is certain: if Israel did launch a war against a Muslim nation, it would enormously boost the Islamist and fanatical groups now vying with more pro-Western forces to dominate the region, especially in Israel's menacingly powerful neighbours, Egypt, Syria and Iraq.

Israel, with a population of only seven million, would proclaim by its actions that it considers the hundreds of millions of Muslims living around it as permanent and implacable military enemies. It is this attitude, far more than any nuclear programme, that poses the real "existential threat" to Israel's long-term survival.