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By Marvin Zonis

Will Israel bomb Iran?

Speculation over an Israeli bombing mission to destroy Iran's nuclear program is at fever pitch.

The consequences of such a strike would be staggering. Iran has vast retaliatory capacity. Missiles would be sent into oil tankers in the Persian Gulf. Hezbollah would launch thousands of missiles against Israel from southern Lebanon. Iran's proxies in Iraq would mount new terror campaigns against withdrawing American troops.

And these are just for starters.

Worse, any Israeli strike would set back Iran's program, but hardly end it. The key to any successful nuclear program is software — technical knowledge — not hardware. It is the hardware that Israel will destroy. Even under stringent sanctions, Iran should be able to find, somewhere in the world, the materials necessary to rebuild its shattered hardware.

Of course, the Israelis may assume that a bombing raid would so disrupt Iranian society that political chaos would follow. That could happen, but it is even more likely that the skeptical and often hostile population would rally around their despised government in a show of great Iranian nationalism. Even if chaos were to follow, any subsequent Iranian government would be likely to proceed with the immensely popular nuclear program.

Whatever the Israeli calculations, it is clear that Israel sees an Iranian nuclear weapon as an existential threat. The history of the Jewish people is that waiting is no way to deal with such a threat. (See the

June 5, 1967, Israeli surprise attack on Egyptian and Syrian airfields and the June 7, 1981, raid that destroyed Iraq's Osirak reactor.)

Israel faces a charging bull and could be impaled on either of its horns — attack and see massive retaliation while incurring U.S. anger or allow the existential threat to blossom. There is an alternative, one that Israel will most likely take for the immediate future. That alternative is to throw sand in the eyes of the charging bull.

That means Israel ups the rhetoric over a prospective attack on Iran in order to pressure the U.S. to do more to bring Iran to the negotiating table. In fact, President Barack Obama is upping the sanctions and the pain they inflict. But no amount of pain will bring Iran to negotiate an end to its nuclear bomb program. Iran might be willing to do that, but in return the U.S. would have to accede publicly to permitting an Iranian nuclear enrichment program under very stringent international supervision.

Just how would that make Obama look before the 2012 presidential election? Not a perception that he would be willing to foster.

So here we are. The options are shrinking — for the Israelis, for the Iranians and for the United States.

The Israelis are not likely to bomb anytime soon. But don't count it out as a last resort.

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