

“Hold Me Back!”

“HOLD ME back!” is a part of Israeli folklore. It reminds us of our childhood.

When a boy has a scuffle with a bigger and stronger boy, he pretends that he is going to attack him any moment and shouts to the spectators: “Hold me back, or I am going to kill him!”

Israel is now in such a situation. We pretend that we are going to attack Iran at any moment and shout to the entire world: “Hold us back or...”

And the world does indeed hold us back.

IT IS dangerous to prophesy in such matters, especially when we are dealing with people not all of whom are wise and not all of whom are sane. Yet I am ready to maintain: there is no possibility whatsoever that the government of Israel will send the air force to attack Iran.

I am not going to enter into military matters. Is our air force really capable of executing such an operation? Are circumstances similar to those that prevailed 28 years ago, when the Iraqi reactor was successfully destroyed? Is it at all possible for us to eliminate the Iranian nuclear effort, whose installations are dispersed throughout the large country and buried far below the surface?

I want to focus on another aspect: is it politically feasible? What would be the consequences?

FIRST OF ALL, a basic rule of Israeli reality: the State of Israel cannot start any large-scale military operation without American consent.

Israel depends on the US in almost every respect, but in no sphere is it more dependent than in the military one.

The aircraft that must execute the mission were supplied to us by the US. Their efficacy depends on a steady flow of American spare parts. At that range, refueling from US-built tanker aircraft would be necessary.

The same is true for almost all other war material of our army, as well as for the money needed for their acquisition. Everything comes from America.

In 1956, Israel went to war without American consent. Ben-Gurion thought that his collusion with the UK and France was enough. He was vastly mistaken. One hundred hours after telling us that the “Third Kingdom of Israel” had come into being, he announced with a broken voice that he was going to evacuate all the territories just conquered. President Dwight Eisenhower, together with his Soviet colleague, had submitted an ultimatum, and that was the end of the adventure.

Since then, Israel has not started a single war without securing the agreement of Washington. On the eve of the Six-day War, a special emissary was sent to the US to make sure that there was indeed American agreement. When he returned with an

affirmative answer, the order for the attack was issued.

On the eve of Lebanon War I, Defense Minister Ariel Sharon rushed to Washington to obtain American consent. He met with Secretary of State Alexander Haig, who agreed – but only on condition that there would be a clear provocation. A few days later there just happened to be an attempt on the life of the Israeli ambassador in London, and the war was on.

The Israeli army’s offensives against Hezbollah (“Lebanon War II”) and Hamas (“Cast Lead”) were possible because they were cast as part of the American campaign against “Radical Islam”.

Ostensibly, that is also true for an attack on Iran. But no.

BECAUSE AN Israeli attack on Iran would cause a military, political and economic disaster for the United States of America.

Since the Iranians, too, realize that Israel could not attack without American consent, they would react accordingly.

As I have written here before, a cursory glance at the map suffices to indicate what would be the immediate reaction. The narrow Hormuz Strait at the entrance of the Persian (or Arabian) Gulf, through which a huge part of the world’s oil flows, would be sealed at once. The results would shake the international economy, from the US and Europe to China and Japan. Prices would soar to the skies. The countries that had just begun to recover from the world economic crisis would sink to the depths of misery and unemployment, riots and bankruptcies.

The Strait could be opened only by a military operation on the ground. The US simply has no troops to spare for this – even if the American public were ready for another war, one much more difficult than even those of Iraq and Afghanistan. It is even doubtful whether the US could help Israel to defend itself against the inevitable counter-stroke by Iranian missiles.

The Israeli attack on a central Islamic country would unite the entire Islamic world, including the entire Arab world. The US, which has spent the last few years laboring mightily to form a coalition of “moderate” Arab states (meaning: countries governed by dictators kept by the US) against the “radical” states. This pack would immediately become unstuck. No Arab leader would be able to stand aside while the masses of his people were gathering in tumultuous demonstrations in the squares.

All this is clear to any knowledgeable person, and even more so to the American military and civilian leaders. Secretaries, generals and admirals have been sent to Israel to make this clear to our leaders in a language that even kindergarten kids can understand: No! Lo! La! Nyet!

IF SO, why has the military option not been removed from the table?

Because the US and Israel like it lying there.

The US likes to pose as if it can hardly hold back the ferocious Israeli Rottweiler on its leash. This puts pressure on the other powers to agree to the imposition of sanctions on Iran. If you don't agree, the murderous dog could leap out of control. Think about the consequences!

What sanctions? For some time now, this terrifying word – “sanctions” – has been bedeviling everybody on the international stage. They are going to be imposed “within weeks”. But when one inquires what it is all about, one realizes that there is a lot of smoke and very little fire. Some commanders of the Revolutionary Guards may be hurt, some marginal damage inflicted on the Iranian economy. The “paralyzing sanctions” have disappeared, because there was no chance that Russia and China would agree. Both do very good business with Iran.

Also, there is very little chance that these sanctions would stop the production of the bomb, or even slow it down. >>From the point of view of the Ayatollahs, this effort is the prime imperative of national defense – only a country with nuclear arms is immune from American attack. Faced with the repeated threats by American spokesmen to overthrow their regime, no Iranian government could act differently. The more so since during the last century, the Americans and the British have repeatedly done exactly that. Iranian denials are perfunctory. According to all reports, even the most extreme Iranian opponents of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad support the acquisition of the bomb and would rally behind him if attacked.

In this respect, the Israeli leadership is right: nothing will stop Iran's endeavor to obtain a nuclear bomb except the massive employment of military power. The “sanctions” are childish games. The American administration is talking about them in glowing terms in order to cover up the fact that even mighty America is unable to stop the Iranian bomb.

WHEN NETANYAHU & Co. criticize the inability of the American leaders to act against Iran, they answer in the same coin: you, too, are not serious.

And indeed, how serious are our leaders about this? They have convinced the Israeli public that it is a matter of life and death. Iran is led by a madman, a new Hitler, a sick anti-Semite, an obsessive Holocaust-denier. If he got his hands on a nuclear bomb, he would not hesitate for a moment to drop it on Tel Aviv and Dimona. With this sword hanging over our heads, this is no time for trivial matters, such as the Palestinian problem and the occupation. Everyone who raises the Palestinian question in a meeting with our leaders is immediately interrupted: Forget this nonsense, let's talk about the Iranian bomb!!

But Obama and his people turn the argument around: if this is an existential danger, they say, please draw the conclusions. If this matter endangers the

very existence of Israel, sacrifice the West Bank settlements on this altar. Accept the Arab League peace offer, make peace with the Palestinians as quickly as possible. That will ease our situation in Iraq and Afghanistan and free our forces. Also, Iran would have no more pretext for war with Israel. The masses of the Arab world would not support it anymore.

And the conclusion: If a new Jewish neighborhood in East Jerusalem is more important to you than the Iranian bomb, the matter is clearly not really so critical for you. And that, with all due modesty, is my opinion, too.

THE DAY before yesterday a correspondent of Israel's popular Channel 2 called me and asked, in a shocked voice: “Is it true that you have given an interview to the Iranian news agency?”

“That's true,” I told her. The agency mailed me some questions about the political situation, and I answered.

“Why did you do this?” she asked/accused.

“Why not?” I replied. That was the end of the conversation.

And indeed, why not? True, Ahmadinejad is a repulsive leader. I hope that the Iranians will get rid of him, and assume that this will happen sooner or later. But our relations with Iran do not depend on one single person, whoever he may be. They go back to ancient times and were always friendly – from the time of Cyrus until the time of Khomeini (whom we provided with arms to fight the Iraqis.)

In Israel, the portrayal of Iran nowadays is a caricature: a primitive, crazy country, with nothing on its mind but the destruction of the Zionist state. But it suffices to read a few good books about Iran (I would recommend William Polk's “Understanding Iran”) which describe one of the oldest civilized countries in the world, which has given birth to several great empires and made a remarkable contribution to human culture. It has an old and proud tradition. Some scholars believe that the Jewish religion was profoundly influenced by the ethical teachings of Zoroaster (Zarathustra).

Whatever the rantings of Ahmadinejad, the real rulers of the country, the clerics, conduct a cautious and sober policy, and have never attacked another country. They have many important interests, and Israel is not among them. The idea that they would sacrifice their own glorious homeland in order to destroy Israel is ludicrous.

The simple truth is that there is no way to prevent the Iranians from acquiring a nuclear bomb. Better to think seriously about the situation that would be created: a balance of terror like the one between India and Pakistan, the elevation of Iran to the rank of a regional power, the need to start a sober dialogue with it.

But the main conclusion is: to make peace with the Palestinian people and the entire Arab world, in order to draw the rug from under any Iranian posture of defending them from us.