

What is Israel's policy toward Iran?

by Thierry Lalevée

The revelations of the past 18 months of intensive contacts between the United States and Iran, are finally about to spark a debate within Israel on its policies toward the Gulf War and the Iran of Ayatollah Khomeini. Such a debate has agitated the Israeli ruling circles internally ever since February 1979 and the last months of the regime of the Shah, but there has been little public discussion. The importance of the debate today is that ultimately, it will help to define Israel's policy toward the region. Can several cards be played at the same time, without undermining Israel's already fragile situation?

While the revelations have caused much embarrassment in Washington, they were received candidly in Jerusalem. After all, it confirmed what they had been saying all along, each time the Israelo-Iranian connection was being exposed: "We have been always ready to help a friendly nation to obtain the release of its hostages," said Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin on Nov. 13—a statement which is far from telling the whole truth. Though elements of Israeli intelligence did play a role in bringing Khomeini to power, there is no doubt that their involvement was negligible compared to the role played by the treacherous Carter administration, which pulled the rug from under the Shah.

However, by the first months after Khomeini's takeover, Israel had a dialogue going with Iranian mullahs. Very publicly, Israel was asked by the Carter administration to send weapons to Iran in October 1980, both as a help to the Iranians against the just-begun war against Iraq, as well as a signal to release the American diplomats. There is evidence that the weapons shipments never stopped. However, Israel didn't just deliver weapons in order to help the release of Western hostages. Indeed, in June 1981, Iranian cooperation with Israel was crucial to the destruction of the Tammouz nuclear power plant in Baghdad. In addition to providing Israel with

important data, the Iranians created the right kind of diversion to enable the Israelis to launch a surprise bombing attack.

Begun under Prime Minister Menachem Begin, this policy has been continued by his successors. The very same persons were used as middlemen, whatever the administration in power. Topping the list was Israel's last ambassador to Teheran, Uri Lubrani, appointed in 1982 as Israel's coordinator for Lebanon. A close partner was Ya'acov Nimrodi, military attaché in Teheran under Lubrani, then a member of the staff of Ariel Sharon while Sharon was defense minister in 1982; Nimrodi later became a "private" arms dealer with offices in Israel, London, and Switzerland.

Both have gone on record justifying their actions. On Nov. 12, Nimrodi told the *Daily Telegraph*, "Israel just tried to do something to help the Americans, the poor people. It is a sad story," adding in answers to questions about Reagan's personal involvement: "If Reagan decided to do it this way, I think he is a clever man." Two days later, Uri Lubrani boasted to the French daily *Liberation*: "We told the Americans that their policy toward Iran was stupid. I told them, time and time again; forget about the taking of the U.S. embassy, think about tomorrow's Iran, the post-Khomeini Iran. Washington has to have a superpower policy based on logic, not on emotions..." In conclusion, Lubrani explained that Israel's policy "has been dictated by our conviction that the historical Iran will reemerge."

Such a statement is believed by no one in Jerusalem. More to the point, the former general director of the Foreign Ministry, David Kimche, declared on Nov. 13: "It is in Israel's interest that Iran has a strong army!"

Despite continuity from Likud to Labor Party and vice versa, Israel's policy toward Iran has been based on a deliberately maintained ideological ambiguity. One school of

thought advocated support to Iran from a purely tactical and military standpoint: Support the Iranian efforts to keep the Gulf war going, and neutralize the region. Such a view is best explained by General Shahak (see *Documentation*). Others have supported Iran from a totally different standpoint—within the framework of a longer-term alliance with Islamic fundamentalism, understood not as a “bulwark against communism,” but as a weapon to undermine Arab nationalism. Ultimately, this Israeli “Shi’ite faction,” as it is called, expects that an Israeli religious fundamentalist state will be able to reach an understanding with Islamic fundamentalism. Meanwhile, Islamic fundamentalism will sweep the region and destroy any organized opposition to Israel.

This has been the policy followed by the Sharon faction within Israel’s intelligence network, a policy much opposed by middle ranks within the Israeli armed forces. Indeed, the very same policy has been implemented in Lebanon since 1982, and it was no coincidence that Lubrani was appointed as coordinator in Lebanon. Under his sponsorship, Israeli networks have been playing a dangerous game of favoring the Lebanese fundamentalists, both the Shi’ites of Nabih Berri’s Amal organization, and the Hezbollahi terrorists. While Lubrani and his circle think this policy has proven effective in containing the Palestine Liberation Organization, Israeli soldiers confronted with daily attacks from the Shi’ites have thought otherwise.

Documentation

On Oct. 3, General Amnon Shahak, director of Israel’s Military Intelligence since January 1986, gave a background interview to the Jerusalem Post. We excerpt his analysis of the Iran-Iraq war.

... From my position, the best situation would be one where there was no victor.

This war is far away from us, but it is of acute interest to us. It cannot last forever and a seven-year war is not something we are familiar with or know exactly how to assess. Two rich countries went into this war—Iran slightly richer, with more reserves in the bank. Iran however went into it with over 40 million people, and Iraq with only 13.5 million.

After six years, these two factors, reserves and population, become crucial. The Iranians for example may have suffered more casualties, but per capita their casualty rate is much lower, having far less influence on national and military morale and on the country’s willingness to fight. It is clear that in this regard Iran has an advantage over Iraq.

Both countries are on the verge of collapse; both countries have had morale problems in their armed forces. We have read of pilots defecting from Iran to Iraq and of soldiers

deserting from both sides. Neither side has managed to win a decisive victory, and there is a strong internal opposition to the war in both Iraq and Iran, yet, there is no knowing how long it can continue or how it will end.

What I can say is that there is no chance of an Iraqi victory, certainly not in the short term. From our point of view, a victory of either side would be a bad thing. Better that there should be no victors. But an Iraqi victory, however hypothetical, is the worse of two evils and presents a much more immediate threat. . . . The Iraqis will be flushed with the high morale of victory if they win. This will boost the self-confidence of the country’s leadership and armed forces and, consequently, Iraq’s self-image as an important regional power. . . .

What are the Iraqis going to do with an army of a million men? They can’t let them all go at once. They will release their reserves, disband a few divisions, send several thousands more troops to keep the population under control in trouble spots, and dispatch several more divisions to the border.

And what about the divisions remaining? There is no doubt where they will land up—on our eastern front. . . . For seven years they have been learning the art of logistics, of moving huge forces along an unprecedentedly long frontier. They have had six years of operational experience in artillery, armor, maintenance, you name it. Just think of feeding a million soldiers a day! And they have done all this for six long years.

The Iraqis have developed an international reputation in the tactical deployment of attack helicopters, and they are considered world experts in the field. They have also developed expertise in chemical warfare and an impressive doctrine for the defence of long borders. All these things make the Iraqi army an impressive one and the implications of an Iraqi victory extremely bad from Israel’s point of view.

Not that an Iranian victory would be any better. They may not send divisions to this region, but they will do everything they can to undermine regional stability. An Iranian victory would be a victory for fundamentalism, no matter where it might be, for all fundamentalists no matter what their religious persuasion.

An Iranian victory would stir up the Shi’ites, not only in Iraq; the entire Gulf, including Saudi Arabia would be in jeopardy. So would Jordan, Syria, and Egypt.

We can already see what is happening in Lebanon. Not even a total and debilitating war with Iraq, has prevented the Iranians from sending considerable resources to Lebanon. This despite fierce opposition to the Hezbollahis from Syria—Iran’s only ally in the Arab world.

The Iranian threat to Israel is less immediate than the Iraqi one. First and foremost, the Iranians threaten other Arab regimes, and Israel only indirectly. The consequences of an Iranian victory cannot be disregarded though. Hence, my hope that neither side come out victorious. . . .