

Israel's Plan for a Military Strike on Iran (Counter Punch)

The Middle East, and possibly the world, stands on the brink of a terrible conflagration as Israel and the United States prepare to deal with Iran's alleged ambition to acquire nuclear weapons. Israel, it becomes clearer by the day, wants to use its air force to deliver a knock-out blow against Tehran. It is not known whether it will use conventional weapons or a nuclear warhead in such a strike.

At this potentially cataclysmic moment in global politics, it is good to see that one of the world's leading broadcasters, the BBC, decided this week that it should air a documentary entitled "Will Israel bomb Iran?". It is the question on everyone's lips and doubtless, with the imprimatur of the BBC, the programme will sell around the world.

The good news ends there, however. Because the programme addresses none of the important issues raised by Israel's increasingly belligerent posture towards Tehran.

It does not explain that, without a United Nations resolution, a military strike on Iran to destroy its nuclear research programme would be a gross violation of international law.

It does not clarify that Israel's own large nuclear arsenal was secretly developed and is entirely unmonitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency, or that it is perceived as a threat by its neighbours and may be fuelling a Middle East arms race.

Nor does the programme detail the consequences of an Israeli strike on instability and violence across the Middle East, including in Iraq, where British and American troops are stationed as an occupying force.

And there is no consideration of how in the longer term unilateral action by Israel, with implicit sanction by the international community, is certain to provoke a steep rise in global jihad against the West.

Instead the programme dedicates 40 minutes to footage of Top Gun heroics by the Israeli air force, and the recollections of pilots who carried out a similar, "daring" attack on Iraq's nuclear reactor in the early 1980s; menacing long shots of Iran's nuclear research facilities; and interviews with three former Israeli prime ministers, a former Israeli military chief of staff, various officials in Israeli military intelligence and a professor who designs Israel's military arsenal.

All of them speak with one voice: Israel, they claim, is about to be "wiped out" by Iranian nuclear weapons and must defend itself "whatever the consequences".

They are given plenty of airtime to repeat unchallenged well-worn propaganda Israel has been peddling through its own media, and which has been credulously amplified by the international media: that Iran is led by a fanatical anti-Semite who, like Adolf Hitler, believes he can commit genocide against the Jewish people, this time through a nuclear holocaust.

Other Israeli misinformation, none of it believed by serious analysts, is also uncritically spread by the film-makers: that Hizbullah in Lebanon is a puppet of Iran, waiting to aid its master in Israel's destruction; that Iran is only months away from creating nuclear weapons, a "point of no return", as the programme warns; and that a "fragile"

Israel is under constant threat of annihilation from all its Arab neighbours.

But the programme's unequivocal main theme -- echoing precisely Israel's own agenda -- is that Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is hellbent on destroying Israel. The film-makers treat seriously, bordering on reverentially, preposterous comments from Israel's leaders about this threat.

Shimon Peres, the Israeli government's veteran roving ambassador, claims, for example, that Iran has made "a call for genocide" against Israel, compares an Iranian nuclear bomb to a "flying concentration camp", and warns that "no one would like to see a comeback to the times of the Nazis".

Cabinet minister Avi Dichter, a former head of the Shin Bet domestic security service, believes Israel faces "an existential threat" from Iran. And Zvi Stauber, a former senior figure in military intelligence, compares Israel's situation to a man whose neighbour "has a gun and he declares every day he is going to kill you".

But pride of place goes to Binyamin Netanyahu, a former prime minister and the current leader of the opposition. He claims repeatedly that the only possible reason Iran and its president could want a nuclear arsenal is for Israel's "extermination". "If he can get away with it, he'll do it." "Ayatollahs with atomic bombs are a powerful threat to all of us." A nuclear Iran "is a threat unlike anything we have seen before. It's beyond politics"

-- apparently worse than the nuclear states of North Korea and Pakistan, the latter a military dictatorship and friend of the US barely containing within its borders some of the most fanatical jihadist movements in the world.

Apart from a brief appearance by an Iranian diplomat, no countervailing opinions are entertained in the BBC programme; only Israel's military and political leadership is allowed to speak.

The documentary gives added credence to the views of Israel's security establishment by making great play of a speech by Ahmadinejad -- one with which the Israeli authorities and their allies in Washington have made endless mischief -- in which the Iranian president repeats a statement by Iran's late spiritual leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, that went unnoticed when first uttered.

In the BBC programme, Ahmadienijad is quoted as saying: "The regime occupying Jerusalem should be eliminated from the page of history". This is at least an improvement on the original translation, much repeated in the programme by Netanyahu and others, that "Israel must be wiped off the map".

But for some strange reason, the programme makers infer from their more accurate translation the same diabolical intent on Ahmadinejad's part as suggested by Netanyahu's fabricated version. Iran's nuclear weapons, we are told by the programme as if they are already in existence, have "presented Israel's leaders with a new order of threat". In making his speech, the BBC film argues, Ahmadinejad "issued a death sentence against Israel".

But, as has now been pointed out on numerous occasions (though clearly not often enough for the BBC to have noticed), Khomeini and Ahmadinejad were referring to the need for regime change, the ending of the regime occupying the Palestinians in violation of international law. They were not talking, as Netanyahu and co claim, about the destruction of the state of Israel or the Jewish people. The implication of the speech is that the current Israeli regime will end because occupying powers are illegitimate and unsustainable, not because Iran plans to fire nuclear missiles at the Jewish state or commit genocide.

Overlooked by the programme makers is the fact that "fragile" Israel is currently the only country in the Middle East armed with nuclear warheads, several hundred of them, as well as one of the most powerful armies in the world, which presumably make most of its neighbours feel "fragile" too, with far more reason.

And, as we are being persuaded how "fragile" Israel really is, another former prime minister, Ehud Barak, is interviewed. "Ultimately we are standing alone," he says, in apparent justification for an illegal, unilateral strike. Iran's nuclear reasearch facilities, Barak warns, are hidden deep underground, so deep that "no conventional weapon can penetrate", leaving us to infer that in such circumstances Israel will have no choice but use a tactical nuclear strike in its "self-defence". And, getting into his stride, Barak adds that some facilities are in crowded urban areas "where any attack could end up in civilian collateral damage".

But despite the terrifying scenario laid out by Israel's leaders, the BBC website cheerleads for Israel in the same manner as the programme-makers, suggesting that Israel has the right to engineer a clash of civilisations: "With America unlikely to take military action, the pressure is growing on Israel's leaders to launch a raid."

As should be clear by now, the Israeli government's fingerprints are all over this BBC "documentary". And that is hardly surprising because the man behind this "independent" production is Israel's leading film-maker: Noam Shalev.

Shalev, a graduate of a New York film school, has been making a spate of documentaries through his production company Highlight Films, based in Herzliya, near Tel Aviv, that have been lapped up by the BBC and other foreign broadcasters. With the BBC's stamp of approval, it is easy for Shalev to sell his films around the world.

Shalev, who claims that he doesn't "espouse a political view", started his career by making documentaries on less controversial subjects. He has produced films on Ethiopian immigrants arriving in Israel, and on the Zaka organisation, Jewish religious fundamentalists who arrive at the scene of suicide attacks quite literally to pick up the pieces, of human remains.

In the past his films managed to bypass the reticence of broadcasters like the BBC to broach the combustible subject of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict outside their news programmes by touching on the topic obliquely. Importantly, however, Shalev's films always humanise his Israeli subjects, showing them as complex, emotional and caring beings, while largely ignoring the millions of Palestinians the Israeli government and army are oppressing.

According to a profile of Shalev published in the Israeli media in 2004, his success derives from the fact that he has developed a "soft-sell approach", showing Israel in a good light without "the straightforward 'hasbara' [propaganda] efforts which explain Israel's case that Israel's Foreign Ministry is required to disseminate to European and American news outlets."

In the words of an Israeli public relations executive, Shalev has a skill in telling Israel's story in ways that international broadcasters appreciate: "[Shalev] also shows the Israeli side, he is not one of those traitors who sell their ideology for money. He has the skill to market it in such a way that overseas they want to see it, and this is very important."

But recently Shalev has grown more confident to try the hard sell for Israel, apparently sure that the BBC and other foreign broadcasters will still buy his films. And that is because Shalev offers them something that other film-makers cannot: intimate access to Israel's security forces, an area off-limits to his rivals.

Before the disengagement from Gaza last year, for example, Shalev made a sympathetic documentary, shown by the BBC, about a day in the life of one Israeli soldier serving there. The film largely concealed the context that might have alerted viewers to the fact that the soldier was enforcing a four-decade illegal occupation of Gaza, or that the Strip is an open-air prison in which thousands of Palestinian have been killed by the Israeli army and in which a majority of Gazans live in abject poverty.

Interviewed about the documentary, Shalev observed: "The army really is very, very careful. There is no indiscriminate firing. I saw, and this was not a show put on just for us, that before any shot is fired there is confirmation that there is nobody behind or in front of the objective. The army is very sensitive to non-deliberate fire."

In other words, Shalev's film for the BBC shed no light on why Israel's "deliberate" fire has killed hundreds of Palestinian children during the second intifada or why a large number of civilians have died from Israeli gunfire and missile strikes inside the Gaza Strip.

Earlier this year Shalev made another film for the BBC, "The Hunt for Black October", to coincide with the release of Stephen Spielberg's movie Munich. "The BBC gains exclusive access to the undercover Mossad agents assigned to track down the Palestinian group responsible for the murder of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics," the BBC was able to glow in its promotional material.

Shalev's latest film, "Will Israel bomb Iran?", follows this well-trodden path. Arabs and Muslims are again deprived of a voice, as are non-Israeli experts.

So why did the BBC buy this blatant piece of propaganda?

Here are a few clues. Shalev's film includes:

- * footage taken from inside Hizbullah bunkers under the supervision of the Israeli army as it occupied south Lebanon.
- * a "rare view" of the inside of the Israeli army's satellite control room, which spies on Israel's Arab neighbours and Iran and which, according to programme, is "incredibly guarded about its security arrangements".
- * an exclusive appearance by Israel's former military chief of staff, Moshe Yaalon, who we are told is "rarely interviewed".
- * a glimpse inside a Rafael weapons factory, which the programme tells us is "rarely filmed".

In other words, the BBC, and the other broadcasters who will air this "documentary" in the coming weeks and months, has been dazzled by Shalev's ability to show us the secret world of the Israeli army. So dazzled, it seems, that it has forgotten to check -- or worse, simply doesn't care -- what message Shalev is inserting between his exclusive footage.

It might have occurred to someone at the BBC to wonder why Shalev gets these chances to show things no one else is allowed to. Could it be that the "hasbara" division of the Israeli Foreign Ministry has got far more sophisticated than it once was?

Is the Israeli government using Shalev, wittingly or not, and is he in turn using the BBC, to spread Israeli propaganda? Propaganda that may soon propel us towards the "clash of civilisations" so longed for by Israel's leadership.

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