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## Self-Defeating

by Trita Parsi  
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The Chairman of Joints Chief of Staff Martin Dempsey serves “Iran’s interests.”

So says Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak. Dempsey’s public caution about an Israeli attack on Iran - "I don't think a wise thing at this moment is for Israel to launch a military attack on Iran" – earned him this dubious honor.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin E. Dempsey, Karen Bleier / Getty Images R

For the Netanyahu government to level such serious accusations against America’s top military commander necessitates a revision of the meaning of chutzpah. We need a stronger term.

But those leveling such accusations—whether in the Likud-led government or their supporters in the US—are the ones that have the most to hide. If the same (flawed and anti-democratic) methodology of questioning the loyalty and patriotism of their domestic political opponents and implying that they are in cahoots with an enemy state were applied to them, a very disturbing picture would emerge.

Who would the true winners and losers of an Israeli attack on Iran be, for instance?

The Obama administration and the US military strongly oppose an Israeli preventive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities. Their opposition, of course, is not rooted in any sympathy with the repressive regime in Tehran. Nor is it necessarily rooted in America's already compromised military position in the region. It is because a strike would not destroy Iran's nuclear program. It would instead increase the likelihood of a nuclear armed Iran down the road. It would unravel the international consensus against Iran. It would undermine the Iranian pro-democracy movement and fortify the regime's grip on power. And, perhaps most importantly, it would eliminate the current insight we have into the Iranian nuclear program and provide the Iranians with a dash-out capability.

The White House is currently very confident that the Iranian's can't dash towards a bomb without getting caught. Any attempt by Tehran to reconfigure the centrifuge cascades to produce highly enriched uranium would be detected within 30-60 days under the current level of inspections (insufficient as they may be). The Iranians would need around twelve months, however, to build a bomb. We would know well before they had a nuclear device in hand.

But if the Netanyahu government takes military action the equation would change dramatically. The Iranian nuclear program, far from being destroyed, would, at best, set back about two years. (The Israelis argue that this is acceptable because Israel can then "mow the lawn" – that is, bomb Iran on a two year basis. The White House believes that is "crazy.")

Iran would respond by invoking Article 10 of the Non Proliferation Treaty: The right to withdraw from the treaty and kick out all inspectors. The program would be rebuilt deeper underground. The Iranian hesitation towards weaponization would likely fall away and a reversal would be unlikely (as was the case in Iraq after Israel bombed Saddam's nuclear facilities in 1981). Without the inspectors overseeing the program, the world would lose its eyes and ears now aimed at Iran's nuclear program.

Since we know that the program wouldn't be destroyed in a strike (even by Israeli estimates), we would move from a relatively safe situation we can monitor and control, to one in which we would have no ability to monitor and manage. Seems like a bad bet.

And all this is without any mention the political fall-out for the United States— would the US condemn or condone the attack?—and implications of skyrocketing oil prices for the US economy and Obama's reelection bid.

In short, an Israeli strike would make matters much worse for the West.

Tehran, on the other hand, might arguably reap some benefits from an Israeli strike that only inflicts limited damage on its nuclear program. If Iran manages to resist the pressure to enlarge the conflict, the only damage it would suffer would be the immediate military blow which would harm its standing both at home and regionally. But in the slightly longer term, higher oil prices would fill the regime's coffers while harming the West, the unraveling of the sanctions would help bring Iran out of its current economic bind, and Tehran could conceivably rally the Arab masses to its side and shift their attention away from Iran's role in the Assad regime's repression in Syria. And perhaps most importantly, the state of emergency following the attack would

enable the regime to further clamp down on the indigenous pro-democracy opposition and prolong its own grip on power.

Whether intentional or not, it is arguably the senseless policies and willful fear-mongering of the Netanyahu government and its US supporters who will wind up serving the interests of Tehran. These forces – we hope – will not sway Dempsey or the many voices in Washington that for years have called for a smarter approach on Iran.