

# Preparing Minds for an Israeli Attack on Iran

by Jeremy R. Hammond

A *New York Times Magazine* article titled “Will Israel Attack Iran?” and written by Ronen Bergman, an analyst for the Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth*, rests entirely upon a single assumption—that Iran is bent on developing nuclear weapons with which to threaten Israel.<sup>1</sup> It can only be described as a propaganda piece, which maintains that central premise only through deliberate omission and distortion of the facts.

The article opens by describing a worried Ehud Barak, Israel’s Defense Minister, pacing with worry because the Iranians “have set themselves a strategic goal of wiping Israel off the map.” Neither author Ronen Bergman nor the *Times* editors bother to correct this false claim. It seems dubious that Bergman is not aware that the claim that Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad threatened to “wipe Israel off the map”, obligatorily accompanied in the mainstream corporate media with the claim that Iran is building nuclear weapons, is a Western media propaganda fabrication, manufactured by misquoting him and taking a statement he made out of context. What Ahmadinejad actually said was a quote from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who said that the regime occupying Jerusalem must be removed. The context of the quote was a speech describing the need for oppressive regimes to be overthrown, the two other examples of which he gave were the Shah’s Iran and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. The editors at the *New York Times* are certainly aware of that Ahmadinejad’s alleged threat to Israel was never made, but choose to propagate it anyway.<sup>2</sup>

Bergman continues in the next paragraph to say that he suggested to Barak “that the Iranian threat was not as imminent as he and [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu have suggested”, and that Barak “reacted with uncharacteristic anger”. The implication of the whole paragraph is that Barak thinks the threat of Iran attacking Israel with a nuclear weapon is an “imminent” threat. Given Bergman’s access to Barak and the extraordinary amount of research that obviously went into his article, it similarly seems dubious that he could not know that Barak believes that a nuclear attack from Iran is *not* an imminent threat, that it is not clear that Iran is actually developing nuclear weapons, and that he rather believes that Iran seeks only a “break out” capacity to do so, such as is the case with Japan.

In 2010, Barak said, “I don’t think the Iranians, even if they got the bomb, (would) drop it in the neighborhood”.<sup>3</sup> When asked last year if Iran *did* develop a nuclear weapon whether it would drop

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<sup>1</sup> Ronen Bergman, “Will Israel Attack Iran?” *New York Times Magazine*, January 25, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/29/magazine/will-israel-attack-iran.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy R. Hammond, “Turning Back From the Point of No Return,” *Foreign Policy Journal*, August 26, 2010, paras. 6-9, <http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2010/08/26/turning-back-from-the-point-of-no-return/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Israeli official doubts Iran would nuke his country,” *Associated Press*, February 26, 2010, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2010-02-26-israel-iran-nuclear\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2010-02-26-israel-iran-nuclear_N.htm).

one on Israel, Barak similarly replied, “Not on us and not on any other neighbor.”<sup>4</sup> The Israeli daily *Haaretz* reported earlier this month that Barak said Israel was “very far off” from a decision to bomb Iran’s nuclear facilities, that “It’s certainly not urgent.” Bergman actually quotes the “very far off” remark, but omits the specific context. The *Haaretz* article added, “The intelligence assessment Israeli officials will present later this week to [U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin] Dempsey indicates that Iran has not yet decided whether to make a nuclear bomb. The Israeli view is that while Iran continues to improve its nuclear capabilities, it has not yet decided whether to translate these capabilities into a nuclear weapon.”<sup>5</sup> Just over a week ago, Barak was asked on Israeli Army radio, “Is it Israel’s judgment that Iran has not yet decided to turn its nuclear potential into weapons of mass destruction?” He replied that there was “confusion” about whether Iran was determined to “break out” from the inspection regime of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) “in an attempt to obtain nuclear weapons”, but that “Apparently that is not the case.” He continued on to say that *if* the country *was* to make the decision to make a nuclear bomb, “Iran would have to announce its leaving the [IAEA] inspection regime”.<sup>6</sup>

Barak has also been clear about the reasons Iran might wish to obtain a nuclear weapon, if it decided to do so. When asked in November in an interview with Charlie Rose on PBS, “If you were them wouldn’t you want a nuclear weapon?” Barak answered, “Probably, probably. I know, it’s not—I don’t delude myself that they are doing it just because of Israel.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, Bergman quotes Barak later in the article expressing his view that Iran might want a weapons capacity *as a deterrent to Israel*. “An Iranian bomb would ensure the survival of the current regime,” Barak told him. “From our point of view, a nuclear state offers an entirely different kind of protection to its proxies. Imagine if we enter another military confrontation with Hezbollah, which has over 50,000 rockets that threaten the whole area of Israel, including several thousand that can reach Tel Aviv. A nuclear Iran announces that an attack on Hezbollah is tantamount to an attack on Iran. We would not necessarily give up on it, but it would definitely restrict our range of operations.” But the full significance of Barak’s words is mostly lost among the general thrust of the article that a nuclear-armed Iran poses an imminent threat to Israel, rather than vice-versa.

After leaving readers with the false impression that a pacing Barak is vexed that an Iran developing nuclear weapons poses an imminent threat to Israel, Bergman provides a useful outline of measures the U.S. and/or Israel have taken to try to sabotage Iran’s nuclear program, including injecting computer viruses into its computer systems and committing acts of terrorism—(though Bergman naturally doesn’t *call* them that)—believed to have been carried out by Israel’s intelligence agency

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<sup>4</sup> Gidi Weitz, “Barak to Haaretz: Iran won’t drop nuclear bomb on Israel,” *Haaretz*, May 5, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/barak-to-haaretz-iran-won-t-drop-nuclear-bomb-on-israel-1.359870>.

<sup>5</sup> Amos Harel, “Barak: Israel ‘very far off’ from decision on Iran attack,” *Haaretz*, January 18, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/barak-israel-very-far-off-from-decision-on-iran-attack-1.407953>.

<sup>6</sup> Ray McGovern, “US/Israel: Iran NOT Building Nukes,” *Consortium News*, January 24, 2012, <http://consortiumnews.com/2012/01/24/usisrael-iran-not-building-nukes/>.

<sup>7</sup> Dan Williams, “Barak reassures Israel over ‘empathy’ for Iran atom bid,” *Reuters*, November 17, 2011, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/11/17/uk-israel-iran-barak-idUKTRE7AGOR420111117>.

Mossad, including assassinations of Iranian scientists. Former head of Mossad Meir Dagan, Bergman notes, “has praised the hits against Iranian scientists attributed to the Mossad”. Having left readers with the impression that the Israeli leadership is struggling over a decision to bomb Iran in order to take out its nuclear facilities, Bergman declines to inform that, for his part, Dagan has called an Israeli attack on Iran “a stupid idea”.<sup>8</sup> An Israeli attack would have the consequence of convincing Iran that it needs nuclear weapons as a deterrent, much as its 1981 bombing of Iraq’s Osirak reactor spurred Saddam Hussein to develop its nuclear weapons program (which Bergman briefly mentions, saying “Israel determined that it had no other option”, declining to point out that Iraq’s program was already under the supervision of the IAEA at the time).<sup>9</sup> “A military attack will give the Iranians the best excuse to pursue the nuclear race,” Dagan said last year. “Khamenei will say, ‘I was attacked by a country with nuclear capabilities; my nuclear program was peaceful, but I must protect my country.’”<sup>10</sup>

Throughout his piece, Bergman writes in a manner that can lead readers only to the conclusion that Iran is actively working on building a nuclear bomb, such as when he writes, “Iran today has five tons of low-grade fissile material, enough, when converted to high-grade material, to make about five to six bombs”—notice he states is not a matter of “if” Iran converts uranium to bomb-grade, but “when”. Nowhere in his article does Bergman mention the fact that the IAEA “continues to verify the non-diversion of declared nuclear material”, meaning that Iran is not diverting uranium to any military program in order to enriching uranium for a bomb.<sup>11</sup>

He writes that “It is believed that Iran’s nuclear scientists estimate that it will take them nine months, from the moment they are given the order, to assemble their first explosive device” and that Iran is “holding the fissile material at sites across the country, most notably at the Fordo facility, near the holy city Qom, in a bunker that Israeli intelligence estimates is 220 feet deep”. By omitting the relevant facts, Bergman thus implies that Iran already has “fissile material”—that is, enriched uranium—ready to make a bomb. In fact, Iran is producing 20-percent enriched uranium, not the 90-percent required for weapons-grade, at Fordo.<sup>12</sup> Nor does he disclose that the Fordo site is already under the supervision of IAEA inspectors.<sup>13</sup> Nor does he disclose that there is widespread

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<sup>8</sup> Isabel Kershner, “Israeli Strike on Iran Would Be ‘Stupid,’ Ex-Spy Chief Says,” *New York Times*, May 8, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/09/world/middleeast/09israel.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Hammond, “Turning Back,” paras. 13-16.

“Implications of Israeli Attack on Iraq,” Interagency Intelligence Assessment, July 1, 1981, [http://www.foia.cia.gov/docs/DOC\\_0000211961/DOC\\_0000211961.pdf](http://www.foia.cia.gov/docs/DOC_0000211961/DOC_0000211961.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Boaz Fyler, “Dagan: Iran strike – only as a last resort,” *Ynetnews*, June 1, 2011, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4077239,00.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Report by the Director General, “Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and relevant provisions of Security Council resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” November 8, 2011 (GOV/2011/65), <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Documents/Board/2011/gov2011-65.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Simon Sturdee, “UN nuclear watchdog to visit Iran: diplomats,” *Agence France Presse*, January 13, 2012, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hV2T7OXdfNV854nekwxVoxZiU81w?docId=CNG.15df2dc3685d51e65aadd309680eff3c.871>.

<sup>13</sup> Nicole Gaouette and Ladane Nasser, “Iran Says Work at Fortified Enrichment Site Supervised by IAEA,” *Bloomberg*, January 10, 2012, <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-01-10/iran-says-work-at-fortified-enrichment-site-supervised-by-iaea.html>.

agreement among experts that even if Iran did have this breakout capacity, it would first need to kick out IAEA inspectors before it could start production on a bomb.<sup>14</sup>

Then Bergman writes, “Over the past year, Western intelligence agencies, in particular the C.I.A., have moved closer to Israel’s assessments of the Iranian nuclear project. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta expressed this explicitly when he said that Iran would be able to reach nuclear-weapons capabilities within a year.” But Panetta did *not* express any change in the assessment of the U.S. intelligence community, which, in 2007, released a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that claimed Iran *had* been working on a weapons program, but that it halted in 2003 and “had not restarted”.<sup>15</sup> The assessment that Iran does not have an active nuclear weapons program remained unchanged in another NIE produced last year.<sup>16</sup> In fact, Panetta just said earlier this month, “Are they trying to develop a nuclear weapon? No. But we know that they’re trying to develop a nuclear capability. And that’s what concerns us.”<sup>17</sup>

If anything, any assessment from Israel that Iran has an active weapons program has moved closer to the U.S. assessment that no such program exists, but that Iran is moving closer to having the technical *capability* of producing a nuclear weapon *if* the decision was made to do so. Bergman impresses upon his readers that Iran is just months—not years—from having this capability, “with its highly developed technological infrastructure”. But a report from the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) says that “Iran is unlikely to decide to dash toward making nuclear weapons as long as its uranium enrichment capability remains as limited as it is today”, and that “no evidence has emerged that the regime has decided to build nuclear weapons.”<sup>18</sup>

Bergman concludes by ominously declaring that “these coming months are indeed the last opportunity to attack before Iran enters the ‘immunity zone’”, meaning the point in time when Iran’s program had developed so far that “an attack could not derail the nuclear project”, and stating that there is a “broad international agreement on Iran’s intentions”. Bergman doesn’t explicitly state what those intentions are, but at this point the only conclusion one could reasonably draw would be that he means an intention to build a nuclear bomb, and possibly to use it on Israel. He closes by writing “I have come to believe that Israel will indeed strike Iran in 2012”, with any such decision being rooted in the desire of Israelis “to survive” and to “defend themselves.”

Through his omissions and distortions, Bergman leaves his readers with the impression that Iran has threatened Israel with destruction, is very near to acquiring a nuclear weapon, and will pose a threat to Israel’s very existence when—not *if*—it does so. The truth is that Iran has *not* threatened to attack

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<sup>14</sup> Hammond, “Turning Back”, para. 3.

<sup>15</sup> National Intelligence Estimate, “Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence, November 2007, [http://www.dni.gov/press\\_releases/20071203\\_release.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20071203_release.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Seymour M. Hersh, “Iran and the Bomb,” *New Yorker*, June 6, 2011, [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/06/06/110606fa\\_fact\\_hersh](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/06/06/110606fa_fact_hersh).

<sup>17</sup> Kevin Hechtkopf, “Panetta: Iran cannot develop nukes, block strait,” *CBS News*, January 8, 2012, [http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-3460\\_162-57354645/panetta-iran-cannot-develop-nukes-block-strait/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-3460_162-57354645/panetta-iran-cannot-develop-nukes-block-strait/).

<sup>18</sup> Tabassum Zakaria and Mark Hosenball, “Iran won’t move toward nuclear weapon in 2012 – ISIS report,” *Reuters*, January 26, 2012, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/01/26/uk-usa-iran-nuclear-idUKTRE80P06120120126>.

Israel, but Israel, as Bergman discusses at length, is rather threatening to attack Iran and, indeed, already has been engaging in acts of terrorism inside the Islamic Republic. The truth is that there is no evidence that Iran has a nuclear weapons program, but that if it *did* decide to acquire a “break out” capability or to actively try to assemble a bomb, it would be a direct response to the military threats from the U.S. and Israel in order to *deter* any such illegal acts of aggression.

If the U.S. and Israel are truly interested in preventing war in the Middle East, the most simple and obvious course of action would be simply to stop threatening and engaging in violence. But propagandists like Bergman and mainstream corporate media outlets like America’s “newspaper of record” willfully blind themselves to that stark reality.