

## MR. OBAMA'S CONTRADICTIONS AND ISRAELI SURVIVAL

*Louis René Beres*<sup>1</sup>

Earlier this month, Vice-President Biden boldly acknowledged that Israel, “as a sovereign nation,” has the right to protect itself against a nuclearizing Iran. In law, the precise preemptive action that Mr. Biden had in mind is called “*anticipatory self-defense*.” Now, however, a parade of high-level envoys from Washington offers Jerusalem very different “advice.” In essence, whether one listens to visiting U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, or next-to-visit National Security Advisor James Jones, the dreary and infinitely futile message is still “tougher sanctions.”

On several occasions, we recall, the United Nations had already imposed “serious” sanctions against Iran. Nonetheless, uranium enrichment has only accelerated in that country. At no time has Tehran shown even the slightest inclination to value a promised proper place in the “international community” more highly than getting “the bomb.” *Once again, Washington just doesn't get it.*

Prime Minister Netanyahu understands, of course, that Israel can rely upon its “*Arrow*” anti-missile system for only a very limited measure of active defense. Israel's ballistic missile defense (BMD) network can never provide the Jewish State with adequate security from a nuclear attack on its civilian populations. In his recent joint news conference with Mr. Gates, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak affirmed this essential understanding, stating no less than three times that all preemptive options must remain on the table.

No country can be expected to cooperate in its own annihilation. Leaving Iran to the unpersuasive sanctions of the United States and/or the United Nations could bring Israel to the outer limits of survival. If U.S. President Barack Obama already understands this, and if he also cares about Israel's survival, he would not now be confronting Mr. Netanyahu with a steady and banal barrage of contradictory Iran options.

What does Israel have to fear in a nuclear Iran? Twenty-nine years ago, I published the first of nine books that contained informed descriptions of physical and medical consequences of nuclear war. These descriptions were drawn largely from a major 1975 report by the National Academy of Sciences, and included the following still valid expectations: large temperature changes; contamination of food and water; disease epidemics in crops, domesticated animals,

---

<sup>1</sup> **LOUIS RENÉ BERES** was educated at **Princeton** (Ph.D., 1971) and is Professor of International Law at **Purdue**. Born in **Zurich** on August 31, 1945, he is author of several of the earliest major books on nuclear strategy and nuclear war, including **APOCALYPSE: NUCLEAR CATASTROPHE IN WORLD POLITICS** (The University of Chicago Press, 1980), and **SECURITY OR ARMAGEDDON: ISRAEL'S NUCLEAR STRATEGY** (D.C. Heath, Lexington Books, 1986). Dr. Beres was also Chair of **Project Daniel**, a small private group that delivered its own special report on **ISRAEL'S STRATEGIC FUTURE** to former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in January 2003. Members of **Project Daniel** included a former member of the IDF General Staff, and a former IAF Chief of Planning.

and humans due to ionizing radiation; shortening of growing seasons; irreversible injuries to aquatic species; widespread and long-term cancers due to inhalation of plutonium particles; radiation-induced abnormalities in persons *in utero* at the time of detonations; a vast growth in the number of skin cancers and increasing genetic disease.

Overwhelming health problems would afflict the survivors of any Iranian nuclear attack upon Israel. These problems would extend beyond prompt burn injuries. Retinal burns would occur in the eyes of persons far from the explosions. Many Israelis would be crushed by collapsing buildings and torn to shreds by flying glass. Others would fall victim to raging firestorms. Fallout injuries would include whole-body radiation injury, produced by penetrating, hard gamma radiations; superficial radiation burns produced by soft radiations; and injuries produced by deposits of radioactive substances within the body.

After an Iranian nuclear attack, even a “small” one, those few medical facilities that might still exist in Israel would be taxed far beyond capacity. Water supplies would become altogether unusable. Housing and shelter could be unavailable for hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, of survivors. Transportation would break down to rudimentary levels. Food shortages would be critical and long-term.

Israel’s complex network of exchange systems would be shattered. Virtually everyone would be deprived of the most basic means of livelihood. Emergency police and fire services would be decimated. All systems dependent upon electrical power could stop functioning. Severe trauma would occasion widespread disorientation and psychiatric disorders for which there would be absolutely no therapeutic services.

Normal human society would cease. The pestilence of unrestrained murder and banditry would augment plague and epidemics. Many of the survivors would expect an increase in serious degenerative diseases. They would also expect premature death; impaired vision, and sterility. An increased incidence of leukemia and cancers of the lung, stomach, breast, ovary and uterine cervix would be unavoidable.

Extensive fallout would upset many delicately balanced relationships in nature. Israelis who survive the nuclear attack would still have to deal with enlarged insect populations. Like the locusts of biblical times, mushrooming insect hordes would spread from the radiation-damaged areas in which they arose.

Insects are generally more resistant to radiation than humans. This fact, coupled with the prevalence of unburied corpses, uncontrolled waste and untreated sewage, would generate tens of trillions of flies and mosquitoes. Breeding in the dead bodies, these insects would make it impossible to control typhus, malaria, dengue fever and encephalitis. Throughout Israel, tens or even hundreds of thousands of rotting human corpses would pose the largest health threat. *The survivors would envy the dead.*

Interactions between individual effects of nuclear weapons would make matters far worse. Although any Israeli preemption effort would now encounter very serious operational difficulties, the Jewish State can *never* rely upon American or international guarantees, or even upon its own system of ballistic missile defense. In the best of all possible worlds, perhaps, Israel could comfortably renounce the current right to individual self-defense and depend instead upon meaningful promises of collective security. But we do not yet live in such a world of reason and goodness. For now, at least, the relevant strategic and legal assessments of Binyamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak plainly trump the flagrantly contradictory analyses offered by Barack Obama, Robert Gates, and James Jones.