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The anatomy of an attack on Iran

By David Moon

In mid-June, Hugh Tomlinson in the Times of London wrote that the government of Saudi Arabia conferred on [Israel](#) the "green light" for use of its airspace for an attack on Iran. This revelation was said to be conventional wisdom inside the Saudi military. Tomlinson also quoted an unnamed United States military source stating to the effect that the US Department of State and the Defense Department had both said "grace" over this arrangement.

The Saudis and Israelis immediately denied the report, while US officials made no specific comments on the subject. The silence and denials nixed further media speculation.

First reported in the Times of London in July 2009 and referred to again in Tomlinson's recent article is word of a supposed meeting between Israel's Mossad chief Meir Dagan and unnamed Saudi intelligence leaders to discuss such an arrangement that both [governments](#) denied then and now.

Given the apparent regional political status quo, how might the

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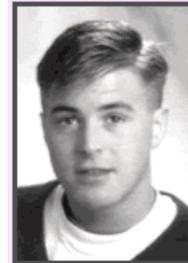
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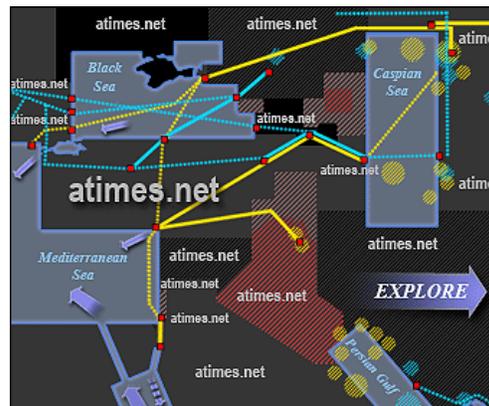
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Israeli [Air Force](#) (IAF) strike Iran undetected on approach and at the very least unacknowledged on return if the decision is made in Jerusalem that the existential threat posed by Iran's arc of nuclear progress can no longer safely be tolerated?

Although the coordination of logistics and tactics of such a long distance mission - 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers) on the straight line from Tel Aviv to Iran's uranium enrichment facility in Natanz - is daunting, the strategic or political realities must be defined before all else.

Overflight of Iraq on a direct bearing to Iran is out of the question. Such a path would cause friction between the US,

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responsible for Iraq's aerial sovereignty, and the next Iraqi government sure to be of delicate composition. It's safe to assume that the US views stability in Iraq far higher on the national interest meter than say apartments in east Jerusalem, thus for Israel the straight line over Iraq comes at a price that it can ill afford to pay.

The likely route to Iran, beginning at regional dusk preferably in the dark a new moon, is to fly a great circle around Iraq. Only careful planning carried out with precision timing and execution will ensure success. For this route, almost every applicable IAF logistics and support asset would be utilized.

The first leg for any F-15I and F-16I fighter bombers is a low-level run up the Mediterranean in the area of the Syrian town of Latakia, where up to three KC-707s (aerial tankers) in race track orbit would top up the tanks of the strike group. This tankage is absolutely necessary for the shorter-legged F-16I (range 1,300 miles). Refueling the F-15I (range 2765 miles) is desirable but not a necessity unless intelligence suggests targets beyond eastern Iran.

To skirt Turkish airspace and the ability of the Turkish military to raise an alarm heard throughout the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the strike group with two pairs of Gulfstream G-550s: one of each outfitted as a network-centric collaborative targeting (NCCT) and one each employing Senior Suter technology must fly low across northern Syria. The G-550 is a small package with the range the speed to accompany the strike group round [trip](#) without refueling - therefore up to the challenge.

The NCCT [aircraft](#) ferrets out air defense radars. The Suter partner beams a data stream containing, what in computer parlance is called a "worm", into air defense radars with the capability of incapacitating an entire air defense network, if such a network is under centralized control.

This technology pioneered by the US Air Force and part of the code named the "Big Safari" program is heady stuff said to work wonders over Syria during the IAF's strike on Syria's North Korean-designed nuclear reactor in September 2007. The support of the G-550s will be instrumental every mile of the mission.

Non-networked anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) in states hostile to Israel may necessitate F-16Is in the tried and true AGM-88 high speed anti-radiation missile (HARM) mission.

Yet another application of high technology was the launch on June 11, 2007, of Ofek-7, as noted by Richard B Gasparre, also a source on G-550s in IAF service at [airforce-technology.com](#), is a "... reconnaissance satellite, which gives Israeli intelligence specialists site and system mapping capability of unprecedented accuracy". Ofek-7 undoubtedly contributed to strike planning for the IAF's mission to Syria.

These powerful tools will be counted on to enable the strike package to skirt either Turkish or Iraqi airspace for a short jump of 150 or so miles to reach Iranian airspace undetected. The distance on a straight line from Latakia to Tabriz in Iran is 618 miles. The flight is shorter if the Israelis avoid Turkey and cut the Kurdish corner.

At a designated point over northern Iran, the strike group splits into Q and E-flights. Q-Flight flies southeast 348 miles to reach the known uranium-enrichment sites in Qom (under construction) and Natanz (operational). E-Flight homes in on the gas storage development site at Esfahan and the heavy water reactor complex at Arak on a more southerly path of 481 miles.

All the while in Iranian airspace, the G-550 Suter and NCCT aircraft work in tandem and with F-16I aircraft to suppress radars and AAA, while F-15Is designated top cover guard against any air-to-air threat put up by Iran's air force.

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The strike package can count on aid in the form of Popeye Turbo cruise missiles launched by at least one Israeli submarine from the Arabian Sea against targets in Iran designed to shield the Israeli planes, degrade enemy responses and sow confusion among the Iranian military.

At some point, one of the three US Air Force RC-135 Rivet Joint ELINT (electronic intelligence) platforms in the area will "see" Iranian air defense radars and hear an explosion of Iranian voices on open airwaves and quickly piece together events in Iran. This collected product will be immediately passed through Central Command to Washington for dissemination to the principals of the National Security Council, including US President Barack [Obama](#).

Seven hours earlier, at least three IAF KC-707s would have flown the 3,500 miles around the Arabian Peninsula, likely painted up like commercial 707 cargo aircraft, transiting international airspace to a meeting point over the northern Persian Gulf. At this extreme range, each KC-707 carries only an estimated 85,000 lbs of fuel to pass to the hungry F-16Is flying 451 miles from Qom and 350 miles from Esfahan.

Each F-16I will require at least 5,000 lbs of jet fuel for the final leg of nearly 1,000 miles through northern Saudi Arabia then home. Thus, a hinge point in IAF planning; the Israelis must determine the mix of F-16Is and KC-707s committed to the mission.

On and over the Persian Gulf, given the presence of US Navy and Air Force AWACS platforms such as the EC-2 Hawkeye and E-3 Sentry along with SPY-1 radars of US Navy cruisers and destroyers, the Israelis can have no expectation at all that the refueling scrum of the F-16Is will go undetected. During this evolution, any IAF planes too damaged to make it home can ditch close to a US Navy ship with a reasonable expectation of rescue.

Much will depend on what the US does with the information in hand. Does Obama choose to inform Iraqi and Gulf Cooperation Council allies of the situation, or will various US radars simply go into "diagnostic mode", as if operators cannot believe what they see?

If Obama's decision is to watch and listen, the strike group can try a run for home across northern Saudi Arabia. Here, the Saudis have a decision. The Saudi Air Force can defend the kingdom's airspace, possibly taking losses and handing out same, or the Israelis can bet on G-550s tricking out the kingdom's air defenses in a manner that gives the Saudis an excuse to say they were blinded by the IAF and the non-cooperation of the US.

By flying north, the IAF reaps the benefits of plausible deniability, a political necessity for US and allied Arab states. These states can honestly say they had no prior knowledge of IAF planes winging it to Iran with full racks of missiles and bombs.

Another option is available to the Israelis to increase the IAF's odds of flying the northern leg undetected. This choice is to strike the "Duchy of Nasrallah" - Hezbollah under Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon - to create cover and sow confusion. If the IAF is to strike Iran, immediate blowback is to be expected from Iran-supported Hezbollah's extensive inventory of unguided missiles.

On June 18, the aircraft carrier *USS Harry S Truman* and task group including the German frigate *Hessen* in the company of an unidentified Israeli naval vessel made a fast transit of the [Suez Canal](#). The Egyptians not only closed the canal to all traffic, all fishing boats were docked, while the Egyptian military lined the banks of the canal. All facets of this passage rank as extraordinary.

It is readily apparent that the US Department of State and the Pentagon collaborated closely with an Arab country to create a lane of fast transit not only for US Navy assets and an attached NATO ally, but for an Israeli ship.

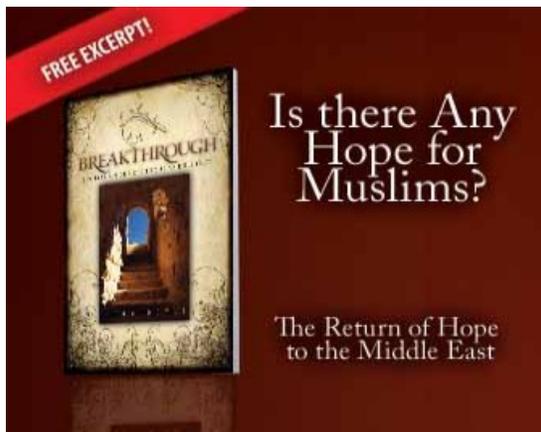
One more element, the IDF launched their improved Ofek-9 reconnaissance satellite on June 22. Is this a matter of timing or of coincidence?

Tensions are high in the region, yet little could precipitate a full diplomatic meltdown quicker than for Iran to directly challenge Israel's blockade of Gaza. And this confrontation is in no way limited to Israel and Iran. Such a provocation could easily inflame public opinion in Sunni Arab states, where leaders are weary of Tehran's grandstanding on the question of Israel. Tehran's rhetoric of threats toward Israel politically undermines Arab governments seen as less fervent on the subject.

CNN reported on June 24 on Iran's canceled designs to directly test the Gaza blockade. Hossein Sheikholeslam, secretary general of the International Conference for the Support of the Palestinian Intifada, said, "In order not to give the Zionist regime an excuse, we will send the aid through other routes and without Iran's name."

Sheikholeslam's comment makes little sense, as the point of Iran's aid exercise was to win the propaganda war against Israel and Arab states. Whatever Iran's "excuse", there is reason now to suspect the Tehran regime will back down if decisively confronted by a motivated and unified coalition of area states.

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