

Operation Gideon: The Israeli Strike on Iran

By

William Stroock

Editor's note (05 January, 2010): the following is a work of fiction...for now

Since it came to power in 1979, the Islamist government of Iran had publically called for the destruction of Israel and had dedicated massive state resources toward achieving this end. The Iranians had close ties with Hezbollah, sending arms, money, and advisors to the terrorist group. By the beginning of the new decade, Hezbollah had a well-trained and -armed paramilitary force, which had fought Israel to a standstill in 2006. Hezbollah also boasted an arsenal of 40,000 rockets. Iran had also attacked Jewish targets around the world, most notably an Argentine synagogue in 1994. During the first decade of the 21st century, the regime had gone to great lengths to build a nuclear device with some international analysts estimating that they could assemble a weapon by 2012 or earlier. Through its arsenal of Shabab class missiles, Iran had the ability to launch a nuclear strike on Israel. More worrisome was the prospect that Iran would give nuclear weapons to Hezbollah.

While the Israelis hoped the international community would unite to stop Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, successive governments had drawn up plans to act militarily should those efforts fail. Israeli planners identified five sites which would have to be destroyed or at least severely damaged in order to stop the Iranian nuclear program. These were the uranium enrichment facilities at Natanz and Qom, the research facility at Esfahan, the plutonium reactor at Arak, and the nuclear reactor at Bushehr. The Defence Ministry also decided to strike the Iranian missile base (a collection of hardened underground silos) outside of Tabriz.

The Israeli plan, called Operation Gideon, after the biblical judge, used air, land, and naval elements. Gideon's main striking power came from its air element, code named Maccabeus Force, a flight of 25 F-15I and 64 F-16I aircraft. The F-15Is were armed with eight GBU-39 laser-guided bombs. These were American-built bunker busters, highly accurate, and capable of penetrating up to six feet of concrete. GBU-39s also carried a smaller warhead so as to minimize collateral damage. The F-16Is each carried a pair of 2,000-pound GBU-27 laser-guided bombs. Some 24 F-16Is were split into a dozen 'Wild Weasel' teams and outfitted with radar homing missiles with the task of seeking out and destroying Iranian Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) sites. The remaining 25 jets (F-16Is and F-15Is) were assigned escort duty. As of yet, the identity of Gideon's commander is unknown. In official reports he has only been referred to by his code name, DAVID.

The Israelis had been training for a large-scale aerial attack for several years. In the summer of 2007 they launched a secret airstrike on Syria's previously unknown nuclear reactor. The following spring, more than 120 IAF (Israeli Air Force) aircraft conducted a massive exercise off the coast of Greece, which, like Iran, is 900 miles from Israel. The opening blow in Operation Cast Lead, Israel's 2009 war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip, was delivered by 120 Israeli IAF aircraft striking dozens of targets within half an hour. Anticipating the large rocket arsenal possessed by Iran and Hezbollah as well, in 2009, the Israelis held a series of nationwide preparedness and air raid drills.

In January of the New Year Israel's human intelligence assets inside the Iranian government and the nuclear program indicated that the Iranians were coming close to completing a deliverable nuclear weapon. The prime minister had no faith in the United Nations or the International Atomic Energy Agency, and little in the American government, which seemed unwilling to stop the Iranian program and indifferent anyway. He convened a secret Wednesday night cabinet meeting. After a long session, the ministers unanimously approved Operation Gideon.

One week later, Operation Gideon was activated. At 0030 hours, Maccabeus Force began taking off from Ramat David, assembled over the Gulf of Aqaba and turned east - southeast for the roughly one and half hour flight across the Saudi peninsula. Maccabeus Force crossed the peninsula and then the Persian Gulf without incident. When Maccabeus Force penetrated Iranian airspace at just after 0230 hours, it broke up into five subgroups. These were Strike Group Simon, Strike Group Judas, Strike Group Eleazar, Strike Group Jonathan, and Strike Group Mathias. The Israelis decided against massive electronic jamming, fearing that doing so would tip off the Iranians that they were under attack. Instead, to avoid Iranian radar, all strike groups flew under 1,000 feet, and once in Iranian airspace, via commercial airways.

It would be impossible for the Israelis to hit each target at exactly the same time. By the time Maccabeus Force crossed into Iranian airspace some targets, like Esfahan, were mere minutes ahead, while others, like the Tabriz missile field, were still nearly an hour away. That said, DAVID had insisted that no more than 40 minutes pass before the first and last targets were struck.

Natanz was the IAF's most important target. More than 300,000 centrifuges used to enrich uranium were housed in three underground bunkers, two of which were more than 300,000 square feet, the other more than 90,000. The bunkers were located 80 feet underground and protected by eight feet of concrete. When fully operational, some analysts believed the complex would be capable of producing material for as many as 20 nuclear devices per year.

Strike Force Simon arrived at their designated launch area, about 30 miles south of Natanz, at 0254 hours. Just before the attack began, Simon's flight leader signaled 'Haifa' to DAVID, indicating that they had achieved complete surprise. The primary targets were the three underground bunkers. The first blow was delivered by a flight of 12 F-15Is, each armed with eight GBU-39s. Two minutes later the second wave, 10 F-16Is, arrived over the target. These were each armed with two 2,000-pound GBU-27 laser-guided bombs. The bombs were dropped on the various administrative buildings at the foot of the hill, smashing through roofs and exploding on ground floors. A third flight of six F-16Is arrived a minute later and dropped their combined dozen GBU-27s into the craters created by the F-15I strike.

Minutes later, the scene at Natanz was repeated at the nuclear enrichment facility at Qom. Strike Group Judas' six F-15Is unleashed 42 GBU-39s from their standoff positions to the south. Thirty-six of these were targeted on the underground centrifuge bunker while the remaining six hit the two adjacent power plants. As at Natanz a dozen F-16Is followed up the strike with 20 GBU-27 laser-guided bombs targeted on the centrifuge bunker.

As it was built above ground, the plutonium reactor at Arak did not require GBU-39 bombs, so no F-15Is were part of Strike Group Eleazar. Instead, the attack was carried out by one dozen F-16Is. Half the jets dropped their bombs on Arak's containment dome, cooling tower, and exhaust stack. The rest were targeted on the heavy water plant's storage facility, cooling towers, the distillation, and exchange plant.

Strike Force Jonathan, six F-15Is and 10 F-16Is, targeted the massive research and uranium conversion facility outside of Esfahan. Mossad had penetrated the facility and learned the location of the fuel manufacturing facility and the conversion facility. Each of these buildings received four GBU-27s. The rest were delegated to buildings that were suspected of housing other important facilities. Once the F-16Is had departed, the remaining six F-15Is attacked the tunnel complex just northeast of the main facility. Rather than trying to penetrate the mountain, these munitions were delivered to both tunnel entrances in the hopes of forcing a catastrophic collapse.

Strike Group Mathias, a dozen GBU-27 armed F-16Is, struck the Iranian missile silo northeast of Tabriz. Two F-16Is were delegated to each of the silos, two to the headquarters facility and the rest to the storage bunkers.

By 0345, as strike group Mathias was approaching Tabriz, the widely dispersed elements of the Iranian air defense network were coming on-line. These included 19 Hawk missile batteries, the majority of them in and around Tehran, and seven Soviet-built S-200 batteries deployed in the west and central parts of the country. Being short range batteries, the Hawks were of little concern to the IAF except when the strike groups approached their specific targets; however, the S-200s had superior range and covered more than 2/3 of the country. The battery outside of Esfahan was the first to go live and was quickly pounced upon by an Israeli 'Wild Weasel' team. The site was quickly knocked out of action. The Bushehr site went active next but was destroyed before it could fire a missile. Just after 0400 hours, a third Wild Weasel team took out an S-200 battery outside of Tehran. At the time of this writing, it is impossible to know what was happening inside Iranian high command, but the fact that no other sites went live that morning suggests they were ordered to keep their radars switched off for fear they too, would be destroyed. That said, the Hawk batteries were gradually brought on-line, and several missiles were fired, though the Israelis claim all their aircraft were out of the area by that time.

At the time of the Israeli attack, the Iranian air force numbered several hundred fighter and attack aircraft, though, with the exception of 30 Mig-29 Fulcrums, these were older models like the F-14, the F-4, and the F-5. Even so, the Israelis delegated two squadrons (one of F-15Is and one of F-16Is) to escort duty. Most of these flew with the strike groups, though there were several pairs that 'freelanced' over Iranian airspace with permission to engage targets of opportunity. These included a pair F-4/D Phantoms scrambling out of the Shiraz air base and four F-5 Tigers taking off from Khatami Airbase near Esfahan. More dramatically, when Strike Group Mathias began its return trek, nine Mig-29 Fulcrums sortied from the 2nd Tactical Airbase outside of Tabriz. While the strike group continued west, its escorts, six F-16I fighters, veered off to engage the Fulcrums, and shot down five without loss. By then, the Iranian air force was on full alert and was attempting to scramble aircraft to form a cordon along its western border along the assumed Israeli escape path. No further air battles were coming that night because Mathias was the only strike group save some of the Wild Weasel teams and escorts, to fly west.

The first shots of Operation Gideon were, in fact, fired more than an hour before on a small island in the Persian Gulf. Lavan Island is well to the south and east of all of the nuclear targets. It boasts a single airstrip capable of handling all kinds of aircraft and ample refueling facilities. There was also a small port. Iranian authorities were far more concerned with the security of Khark Island to the northwest; as a result, save for one SAM missile battery, Lavan Island was undefended. Most importantly, Lavan Island was

isolated, out of the way, and in the chaos of the coming days, it was hoped that few would notice that its facilities had gone off air.

No one on the island noticed when, on the night Operation Gideon began, a small freighter appeared two miles off the southern coast. Nor did anyone pay attention when a quartet of Blackhawk helicopters, the lead element of Solomon Force, took off from the deck of the freighter. One of the helicopters landed just south of the SAM battery, while the other three put down on the airstrip three miles to the east. Fifty-six Israeli commandos from Sayareet Makhel were on the ground. Another 100 were making their way ashore in rubber boats in two sections. The first section headed for the port on the island's eastern tip while the other made for the fuel storage tanks. Both targets were taken without incident or casualties, save a few Iranian workers knocked out by Israeli rifle butts. Within an hour, the freighter was docked at Lavan's small port. Israeli crews worked feverishly to unload hundreds of cargo pallets. David accompanied Sayareet Makhel ashore and established his headquarters in the air control tower. The Blackhawks stood by for rescue operations in case an Israeli jet was shot down.

At just after 0500 hours, Lavan was receiving Strike Group Judas. By 0600, all aircraft, 76 in all (including three C-130s which had flown in behind Maccabeus Force), had landed. They were refueled by Solomon Force's ground crew, rearmed, and parked on the tarmac underneath camouflaged tarps. Israeli planners had counted on complete chaos in Iran to keep official attention focused anywhere but Lavan. Just in case, Kurdish agents and several Iranian-born Israelis with the commando group manned the control tower and port radio installation to simulate normal radio traffic. There was nothing else to do but watch and wait.

By the time Maccabeus Force had finished the first phase of the raid; international media had come on air and reported the airstrike. In one case, CNN broadcasted images of the Esfahan facility in flames while the correspondent on scene talked of 'dire events.' Iranian state television broadcast shots of Esfahan as well, but after several minutes switched to footage of schools and hospitals which they claimed had been struck by the Israelis. This was the Israelis' only source of intelligence for several hours until Mossad agents at or near the various sites sent in reports. In one case, an agent in a site's security detail transmitted an extensive report of the damage inflicted. In another instance one of the Mossad's Kurdish contacts was able to pass on snippets of information gleaned from eavesdropping on telephone calls, reporting that his boss had uttered the words, 'The tunnel is completely collapsed.'

Israeli government and military spokespersons, who had been rehearsing these press conferences for months, pretended to know nothing of the attack. An IAF spokesperson claimed all Israeli combat jets were at their bases and offered to arrange an inspection tour for an al Jazeera reporter. The Foreign Minister staged an impromptu press conference where he disavowed the attack. When an incredulous BBC reporter asked why air raid alarms had been blaring across the country for over an hour, the Minister simply said, 'Because we know the Iranians will blame us.'

By 0700 hours, the Israeli government had to decide whether to order Maccabeus Force simply to return home or launch a second round of strikes. That morning, the Prime Minister reconvened the cabinet. Two hours of furious debate followed, in which many ministers argued that Gideon had clearly damaged the nuclear program without loss to Gideon and it was best to withdraw before something went wrong. The defense minister worried about keeping nearly 76 aircraft so far away from Israel when some sort of

retaliatory strike, either from Hezbollah or Iran proper, was surely in the works. Despite the concerns voiced by the defense minister, the cabinet voted to continue the attack.

As soon as word was received, phase two of Operation Gideon began. The Iranian government felt that the attack was over and was therefore stunned when at 1300 hours their combat air patrols deployed along the western border began falling from the sky. First, a pair of F-5 Tigers was shot down over Abadan. Then another pair of F-5s was downed over Shiraz. Soon after, five of six Fulcrums screening Tabriz were shot down without warning. There was confusion among Iranian ground controllers and panic amongst the surviving Iranian pilots who simply did not understand that they were under attack from the south and not the west. Iranian aircraft scattered to all points of the compass. With the way open, Israeli jets added to the confusion. Pairs of F-16Is buzzed the cities of Abadan, Tehran, and Bandar Abbas, breaking the sound barrier and dropping smoke flares in an effort to make the Iranians think these cities were under attack. Now understanding that a new attack was underway, Iranian missile crews at or near the nuclear sites activated their radars. Once again, Israeli Wild Weasel teams struck, destroying a pair of S-200s and a trio of Hawk batteries before any of them could get off a shot. The surviving Iranian combat air patrols were vectored to defend Arak and Natanz, and the remaining Fulcrums at Tabriz were scrambled. Once again, Israeli combat air patrols closed and did battle with their Iranian counterparts. The citizens of Esfahan were treated to an aerial spectacle as a quartet of F-16Is battled a mixed group of Iranian F-5s and F-14s, shooting down three of each before the rest broke off. But these were not the Israeli's targets.

At approximately 1500 hours, a dozen F-16Is roared over the Qods Force Training Center at Navahand. The Israelis dropped GBU-27s on barracks, headquarters, and other administrative buildings. Unfortunately for the cadets at Navahand, they had been assembled on the barracks green for a speech on the current crisis just when the Israelis arrived. An Israeli pilot mercilessly put two bombs into the center of the green, killings hundreds. This scene repeated itself throughout the Tehran region as Israeli jets struck the Hezbollah, Khomeni, and Imam Ali bases. In Tehran proper, F-15Is hit both the Ministry of Defense and the headquarters of the Pasdaran, Iran's secret police. Both were reduced to smoldering ruins. To the south, Israeli jets attacked the Bahanor training base. A handful of F-16Is flew reconnaissance missions over the Arak, Natanz, Qom and Esfahan nuclear facilities.

Meanwhile, Israeli Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) roamed the skies of southern Lebanon and Beirut, focusing their cameras on the streets and roads in search of a certain unmarked Mercedes. When that car was spotted just outside the gates of the Iranian embassy, rockets from two UAVs were fired, scoring a direct hit on the vehicle and killing all inside. Hezbollah's leader and the commander of its military wing were dead. The news was immediately broadcast throughout the world, with shocking images of crowds gathered around the smoldering vehicle holding up singed body parts to the camera. The next few days saw widespread protests and rioting in Beirut, but Hezbollah made no threatening moves toward Israel.

Once again the Israeli aircraft returned to Lavan and refueled and rearmed. Their reconnaissance photos were quickly processed and analyzed. The Israelis were happy with what they saw. The bomb strikes on the plutonium reactor at Arak had collapsed the structure in on itself. Much of the heavy water facility had been set afire and still burned. At Natanz, all three of the underground chambers showed signs of collapse. Several holes were clearly visible, and smoke billowed from all as well as from the tunnel entrances. Many of the adjacent buildings had been cleaved in two by the bomb damage. Much of the

Esfahan facility had been destroyed by the attack, with photos showing many of the buildings hollowed out by flames. The tunnel entrances were strewn with rubble.

Given this information, and the fact that the Lavan base still had not been discovered, DAVID convinced the cabinet to authorize one final strike. This time the targets were Natanz, Qom, and the underground bunkers at Esfahan. It was determined that F-16Is alone could finish off Natanz. The three underground chambers received a total of 40 GBU-27 bombs delivered from 20 aircraft. A dozen F-15Is hit the underground bunkers at Esfahan. Follow-on reconnaissance photographs showed a catastrophic collapse of at least one bunker and massive amounts of black smoke billowing from another entrance. Qom was struck by the other force of F-15s whose combined 96 GBU-39 bombs breached the bunker in at least seven places.

The last round of reconnaissance photographs revealed the massive harm done to Iran's nuclear program. As they were above ground, both Bushehr and Arak were almost completely destroyed. The three underground bunkers at Natanz had been collapsed and set afire with loss of most of the centrifuges. The facility at Qom suffered a similar fate. The uranium conversion facility at Esfahan was obliterated. Even worse, tons of uranium gas was leaked into the atmosphere. All silos at the Tabriz missile field were destroyed. It was later learned that while no major figures in the defense ministry, Pasdaran, or Qods Force suffered casualties, several generals and important mid-level officers were killed, as were dozens of important administrative personnel.

The various strike groups re-formed and returned to Israel via the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula. The freighter used to transport Solomon Force was scuttled and the combined personnel and Black Hawk helicopters flown out on the C-130's.

Ten minutes after the last Israeli aircraft, an F-16I, arrived at Ramat David. The Prime Minister made an impassioned speech before the Israel Knesset, 'Over the past three days, the Jewish people have defended themselves and shall do so again if we are so threatened.'

Before the prime minister had a chance to finish his speech, air raid sirens sounded again, as the first wave of rockets from Hezbollah rained down on Israel....

A Note on Sources

For Iran's nuclear facilities and what it would take to destroy them see *Osirak Redux? Assessing Israeli Capabilities to Destroy Iranian Nuclear Facilities* by Whitney Raas and Austin Long. *Global Security* has detailed descriptions of Iran's nuclear sites and some very good photo illustrations. For the Tabriz missile field see <http://geimint.blogspot.com/>. This site also has extensive analysis of Iran's SAM network. Information for Lavan Island Airport can be found at World Aero Data. Special thanks also to Leon Doell (www.Astro-cons.com) for naming Maccabeus Force.

