

## **Missiles from the North**

The air in the conference room had grown hot and stale in direct proportion to the number of bodies present. From a handful of men assembled that morning, the ranks had swelled dramatically as members of the National Security Council filed in.

The NSC served as the lead organization responsible for the aggregation and analysis of information – both foreign and domestic – related to Israel’s defense. Formed in 1999, it had proven to be invaluable on numerous occasions, and Rabinovich had come to depend on its data-driven, strategic options at times of crisis. Oftentimes it was the only thing with the power to silence acrimonious debate.

“Don’t we have any damned air-conditioning?” Rabinovich bellowed. “For God’s sake, can we make this place habitable? We’re going to be living here for a while.”

A young aide picked up the phone and called engineering, relaying the Prime Minister’s request verbatim. Within seconds, the first wave of cool air wafted through the room.

“That’s better,” he said, nodding to the aide.

“Now that I can concentrate, I’d like to turn our attention to Mr. Meir, whose penetrating voice we can hear above the collective din like a fishwife hawking her wares amidst an unruly crowd. You must be very confident of your position, Gabriel.”

“I don’t appreciate your sense of levity, Avi...certainly not when we are at war. But, yes, I’m quite confident of my position,” the head of Security Policy for the NSC responded.

“I didn’t realize that we had declared war...nor upon whom we made such a declaration,” Rabinovich responded.

“Perhaps you think that the overtaking of the Golan Heights is a mere skirmish, or that the wave of suicide bombers was a minor act of terrorism...or, even more dangerously, that things won’t continue to escalate.”

“Quite the contrary...I think we are getting our asses kicked and it’s time we kicked back harder.”

“Then you support my assertion that we have sufficient grounds for deploying unconventional weapons at this point.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Meir,” Hart stood and interjected. “You are speaking of nuclear weapons?” his tone one of disbelief.

Having witnessed the near annihilation of New York City following the detonation of a 15-kiloton nuclear bomb, Hart responded viscerally. He could taste the sickly sweet bile rise up in his gut in response to Meir’s plea. It was madness to unleash such weapons, but before he could speak again, Rabinovich was on his feet.

“Gabe, you talk casually about unleashing our weapons, as though it would represent a minor escalation on our part. Yet tens, if not hundreds of thousands of people would die in the process. Israel would be a pariah among nations. Even the United States would disavow their relationship with us.

“Are you truly willing to accept that price...to incinerate tens of thousands of people in a few milliseconds? And how different would we be then from the Nazis who burned our people in

ovens? We would simply be more efficient!” He shouted the last few words, pounding his fists on the table.

“Why do these weapons exist if not to protect the Jewish state? Are they but a bluff...a card we will never play? I’d rather go down in history as a protector of our people at horrific costs than stand by impotently as we are invaded!” Meir shouted back.

A red-faced Rabinovich started to respond, but Moshe Simon put his hand gently on the Prime Minister’s shoulder, communicating that he would take the next round.

“I won’t argue the moral appropriateness of nuclear weapons, but I will argue the timing from a military perspective. If we deploy them, we need to have absolute clarity regarding our target – which invader represents the greatest threat to our nation. Based upon the information filtering in, it appears that Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, and presumably Russia are aligned. But which is the head of the serpent? Whom do we strike? I suggest that we keep our powder dry and respond strategically rather than impulsively, despite our anxiety.”

Rabinovich turned towards Hart. “Commander, I don’t normally put my guests in the hot seat, but I am ready for you to weigh in on this debate. You speak for President Conner and as an astute military strategist. Lend us your perspective at this divisive time.”

Hart was grateful to have had a few minutes to collect his thoughts. He understood the gravity of what he was about to say, and he chose his words with great care.

“Gentlemen, I can’t fathom the existential angst that comes with being a small nation surrounded by powerful enemies intent on my country’s destruction; nor the tremendous sense of responsibility each of you feels for protecting the people of Israel. But I have listened carefully to the arguments, and I believe I speak for President Conner when I say that the use of nuclear weapons, at this point in time, would be a grave mistake.”

“You say you listened, Commander, but I see little evidence of that based upon your comments,” Gabriel Meir snapped.

“Mr. Meir, I did listen, and I believe that General Simon has made a cogent argument. You have no evidence to suggest the imminent destruction of your state, nor a clear target for retribution. It takes only minutes for you to launch a nuclear weapon, but once deployed, it cannot be called back. You will have forever changed history, just as we did in August 1945.”

He paused. “So my counsel to you is clear: Respond militarily as you must, but reserve the contemplation of weapons of mass destruction until there is unanimity of opinion that the future of Israel is in peril.”

“Moshe, what is our strategy for the Golan?” Rabinovich moved on, hoping to put the argument about nukes to bed.

“We need to address the imbalance in troop strength. We’ve called up 10,000 reservists, but it will be forty-eight hours before they are ready for deployment. I’ll let General Norkin speak to the IAF’s response.”

Fifty-three-year-old Major General Amikam Norkin had a long history with the IAF. In 1985, he had become the youngest F-15 pilot in the world. Handsome, smart, and a fierce warrior, he commanded tremendous respect from his troops.

“After losing four planes and four pilots, I’m not eager to send additional sorties into Syria at this time...” Norkin began.

Rabinovich interrupted, “Why not send in our F-35s? Why did we pay \$200 million apiece if not for such an occasion?”

The Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II was the most advanced fighter jet in the world, capable of flying at Mach 1.6 and pulling nearly 9g’s. Its stealth design rendered it virtually

undetectable by air defense systems, a fact bolstered by Israeli's insistence on incorporating its own electronic warfare equipment to ensure invisibility. The modified plane became known as the F-35I.

“Sir, we can deploy the F-35, and we know that there is an extremely low probability of detection, but allow me to suggest another alternative. Our priority, as I understand it, is to recapture the Golan, and to do so before the Syrian artillery is moved into positions that will enable the bombardment of vital parts of our country. Once the threat from the east is mitigated, there will be ample time for retribution.”

“And so what precisely are you recommending, General?” Rabinovich pressed.

“I'm recommending that our F-15s begin saturation bombing of the Golan, while the F-16s provide supportive cover. We won't rout the enemy, but we will inflict heavy casualties and undoubtedly suspend the transport of heavy weapons into the region. The bombing will continue until our reservists are in position to launch a counter-attack.”

“And if the Syrian Air Force responds with additional sorties of their Sukhoi-24s?”

“We will blow them out of the sky, Sir, as we have in every previous encounter with the Syrians.”

Simon directed the next question to Norkin. “Tell us what has happened in Gaza, General.”

“We have destroyed the major repositories for Hamas missiles, as well as their manufacturing facilities. Their command and control structure is no longer viable. We've also hit dozens of locations used to house troops. I would describe it as *utter and complete destruction*, Sir.”

“At least that’s one flank that no longer represents a threat. Thank you, General. Please have a seat,” Rabinovich instructed before continuing. “Once we repulse the enemy in the Golan, much of our stability will be restored.”

Heads around the conference room began to nod in consensus, giving Rabinovich the confidence he needed to reassert his aversion to nukes. “I believe that this information simply reaffirms the position shared by General Simon, Commander Hart, and myself regarding nuclear escalation. We will proceed as our military leaders have outlined – unless and until there is an unforeseen event that changes the calculus of this war. I suggest we return to our work and reconvene as needed.”

Hart stood to leave, but Rabinovich motioned for him to stay. The prime minister waited until the conference room emptied before shutting the door.

“Sit, Commander. I’m only going to take a moment of your time.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And you don’t have to call me *Sir*. I’d prefer *Avi*.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Rabinovich chuckled for the first time since Hart’s arrival. “Okay, Commander, I see that some things are just too ingrained to change. On a serious note, you were just privy to a conversation involving the contemplated use of nuclear weapons. I heard your words...highly rational, well-chosen words...in response to Mr. Meir, but now I want to hear from your heart. Before you speak, however, know that if another shoe drops, the pressure to utilize our most destructive weapons will escalate in proportion to the threat.”

“If I may speak freely, Mr. Prime Minister...”

“That’s what I’m asking for, John.”

“It scares the living hell out of me. If you were to act as Mr. Meir advised, your presumed target of attack would be Damascus.”

“And why not the entrenched forces in the Golan?”

“Because you will successfully remove the enemy with conventional forces and IAF bombs. Furthermore, you wouldn’t want to render the area uninhabitable. But that won’t eliminate an authoritarian regime poised on your border who has tasted blood. A 100-kiloton nuclear bomb mated to a cruise missile targeted at the presidential palace will put a permanent end to the brutal Assad reign.”

“Would that be so bad?” Rabinovich asked, playing devil’s advocate.

“We all want to see Basheer Al-Assad in a grave, but not accompanied by a quarter million civilians who may not share the same sentiment...people who have had little choice but to support the regime during the civil war. But that’s not what scares me.”

“I didn’t realize anything frightened Navy SEALs, Commander.”

“When you live through the detonation of a nuclear bomb or the release of a biological weapon, you gain an appreciation for the fragility of life, as well as for the darkest side of human nature. If you nuke the Syrians, or the Iranians for that matter, the Russians may elect to retaliate. And when that happens, America will be quickly drawn into direct confrontation with our most formidable adversary.”

“It sounds like you are describing World War III, Commander.”

“That is precisely what I am describing, Mr. Prime Minister.”

“Let’s hope it never comes to that,” Rabinovich said in a subdued tone. “I know you must keep President Conner informed. Please give him my regards and tell him that we are doing our best to navigate the difficult road ahead.”

“I will, Sir.”

Hart excused himself and headed for the SCIF. Within seconds, Jonathan Conner was on the phone.

“What’s happening there, Commander? We’ve been watching the Golan in real time, and saw as it was overrun. I never thought I would witness an Israeli retreat.” He paused. “We also know that Israel has lost four warplanes over western Syria – presumably to the newly installed S400 SAM batteries.”

“That’s correct, Sir. For the past hour, there has been an aggressive debate on how to respond...including the potential deployment of nuclear weapons.”

“Tell me you’re kidding, Commander. That would be political suicide. Every nation, including ours, would abandon Israel for the unjustified escalation.”

“Yes, Sir, I told them as much. That debate has, for the time being, ended.”

“Thank God you are there to lend a sane perspective and support the Prime Minister. He’s got his hands full with the hard-right members of his party – especially Meir. I remember when people thought Avi was extreme. Now he’s considered a moderate.”

“Yes, Sir. Neither the Prime Minister or General Simon will respond in haste to a threat, but they will protect their country.”

“Then let’s pray that the other shoe that Avi alluded to never drops.”