

PART I: A Picnic Before Doomsday

I saw the ram goring westward, northward, and southward, and no beasts could stand before it, and no one could save [anyone] from its hand, and it did according to its will, and it grew.

— Daniel 8:4

Chapter 1: Existential Issues

A nightmare gripped the Prime Minister of Israel. He twisted the corner of his pillow, which had transformed into something critical in his dream, until he suddenly awoke, hyperventilating. He released the pillow and looked around, as he tried to reorient himself to reality. Stepping out of bed, the Prime Minister tried to ignore his pounding headache; he had worked through many over the last week.

He had barely made it to the closet and stress was already assaulting him from every direction. As he got dressed, competing pressures turned in his mind: political threats to bring down his governing coalition, a ballooning budget to balance, and – above all – a potentially existential military threat. There were countless conventional and chemical warheads already pointed at Israel, and nuclear warheads could soon enter the strategic picture. The emergency phone on his desk rang. He rushed to answer it.

The voice of the Mossad chief came over the line: “Mr. Prime Minister, our intelligence assets indicate that we have only a week left before Iran will have placed all centrifuges and other key nuclear weapons components in Fordo.” The head of Israeli intelligence was referring to the nuclear enrichment facility near Qom that was highly fortified against aerial attack, in part because Iran had built it deep inside a mountain.

“But wasn’t Fordo sabotaged?”

“Only in a minor way. Iran exaggerated the damage to make world powers think that there was more time to stop them.”

“So in a week we will have no more military option to delay their nuclear program?” he asked, in alarm.

“Yes, Sir.”

His headache throbbing, the Prime Minister hung up the phone and called the Chief of General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces. “We are fast approaching the zone of immunity. Modify existing military plans to launch a strike in 48 to 72 hours.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The Israeli leader now needed to coordinate with his strongest ally. His first impulse was to try to call the President of the United States, but there was no telling how long it would take to get through. More importantly, the Prime Minister didn’t want it to seem as if he was somehow requesting permission to defend his own country. This was more of a courtesy call among friends, to put the American President on notice, since the United States could easily be drawn into the conflict in the event of an Israeli strike. The Prime Minister also wanted there to be a historical record of his last attempt to persuade the world’s only superpower to eliminate a threat that no other country, including his own, could address as effectively and decisively. So he wrote a diplomatic cable to the President, knowing that a phone call from him would soon follow.

The cable detailed the many reasons to stop the Iranian threat by force. It also mentioned the closing window of opportunity for Israeli military action but included an accommodation: “I am preparing a military strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities sometime in the next three to seven days. If, in the next 24 hours, you provide me with a written reassurance that the United States will give Iran a firm ultimatum, backed by

overwhelming force, requiring the complete and verified dismantling of their nuclear program starting within 48 hours, then I will cancel the strike.”

Immediately after dispatching his message, the Prime Minister called his chief of staff. “Get everyone into my study for a working breakfast, starting immediately. Then inform the security cabinet that I’m convening an emergency meeting scheduled for one hour from now. Bring the entire Iran dossier with you to the breakfast meeting.”

The premier would need to brief his security cabinet on the latest developments and address any objections or concerns that might be raised regarding an Israeli military strike. There was sure to be a vigorous debate, even though the idea of preemptively attacking Iran had already been vetted in the international press, thanks in part to various public pronouncements by former intelligence officials. “Things that should have been left for careful deliberation by the security cabinet alone turned into a political football covered by the world media,” he thought to himself, shaking his head. “This must be the most ungovernable democracy on the planet!”

The Prime Minister walked into a nearby room, where his entire staff was ready for his next instructions. He and his aides were soon perusing various intelligence reports and analyses to decide what to include in his presentation to the security cabinet. As the country’s top decision-maker looked over some documents, he noticed that his vision had become a bit blurry. He ignored the issue, since he hadn’t slept much during the last few nights and figured it was just fatigue.

After the breakfast meeting, the Prime Minister walked towards the car outside waiting to shuttle him to the security cabinet meeting. His headache intensified and, before he could make it all the way to the door, he suddenly fell to the floor, with some classified documents spilling out of the folder in his hand. His aides scrambled to get an emergency evacuation to the nearby Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem. The Prime Minister was unresponsive.

Within 20 minutes, the unconscious premier was at the hospital with his wife nearby. An entire nation would soon be worried about the health of its leader, but she was fretting about her husband. The doctors used magnetic resonance imaging and computed tomography scans to investigate the problem before concluding that the Prime Minister had a brainstem tumor that was dangerously increasing intracranial pressure. The attending physicians immediately intubated him in order to decrease the pressure via hyperventilation; they also intravenously administered mannitol and high-potent steroids, while keeping his head elevated at a 30-degree angle.

The senior neurologist on the emergency medical team treating the Prime Minister addressed the leader’s wife and aides: “It’s quite serious because the brainstem affects vital functions like blood pressure, breathing, and heart rate. The good news is that the tumor is clearly separated from surrounding brain tissue, so it’s still possible to resect it with brain surgery. And advances in microsurgical techniques are making such surgery much more successful than in the past. We should be able to get him the very best treatment fast enough for his cognitive function to be preserved.”

“What’s the bad news?” his wife asked.

“We generally have world class medicine, but the best specialists for this particular procedure are not in Israel. He needs the surgery as soon as possible, so we don’t

recommend flying all the way to the United States. There are top neurosurgeons specializing in brainstem operations that we can recommend in Germany.”

The Prime Minister’s chief of staff reminded the doctors of the need for absolute secrecy: “We don’t want the public to panic. And we don’t want our enemies to think that the country is without effective leadership right now.”

“We understand. We will abide by our professional duties toward the Prime Minister as we would toward any patient.”

About 90 minutes after he had fallen to the floor, the Prime Minister was transported from Hadassah Medical Center to an emergency military evacuation plane. Following the three-hour flight to Frankfurt, the Israeli leader was carted under tight security into the emergency room of a Frankfurt hospital with one of Europe’s top neurosurgeons.

During the Prime Minister’s hospitalization in Germany, the Deputy Prime Minister would take over the leadership of the country. The developments requiring the power transfer would be disclosed, under the strictest of confidentiality, only to him and the remainder of the Prime Minister’s security cabinet. The rest of the country and the world would be told only that the Israeli premier had been hospitalized for a medical procedure. Once his prognosis became clearer, his aides – together with the Deputy Prime Minister and the rest of the security cabinet – would decide how much more to disclose to the public.

As important as the Prime Minister was to the fate of his country, a group of men on a submarine would be even more important. However, they wouldn’t realize their historic role until after they enjoyed a brief, but much-needed visit with some of their loved ones.