The specter of a military attack by Israel against Iranian nuclear installations is the latest nightmare scenario to spike tensions in the Middle East.

A Jan. 29 New York Times Magazine article by an Israeli journalist quoted Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak and other Israeli military and intelligence officials on the looming possibility of Israel bombing Iran's clandestine nuclear enrichment facilities. While Iran insists the work is energy-related, Israel and international inspectors suspect the Iranians are developing nuclear weapons.

Not all those Israelis interviewed favored airstrikes, but the article concluded that such an attack would occur in 2012. Its publication has provoked intense speculation by professional Middle East-watchers in South Florida.

In the article, Moshe Ya'alon, Israel's vice prime minister, said bombing Iran was a last option, but he aligned himself with Israeli hawks.

"One way or another, Iran's nuclear program must be stopped,' he was quoted as saying. "It is a matter of months before the Iranians will be able to attain military nuclear capability. It is up to the international community to confront the regime, but nevertheless Israel has to be ready to defend itself. And we are prepared to defend ourselves in any way and anywhere that we see fit.'

If attacked, Iran would retaliate against Israel and its principal ally, the U.S., Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei implied this month when addressing new U.S. economic sanctions against Iran.

"In response to threats of oil embargo and war, we have our own threats to impose at the right time," Khamenei said .

Any discussion of Israeli-U.S. relations with Iran opens a hornets' nest of issues: Israel's tensions with Iran, but also with its other neighbors in the region; Iran's Shiite Muslim majority and the friction with its Sunni Muslim neighbors; Iran's ruling ayatollahs and their fears of regime change engineered by the West, in particular the U.S.; and the crucial interests of China and Russia in the region.

Elections are due in the U.S., Israel and Iran in the next two years and hawkish rhetoric is rumbling in all three countries.

'Nightmare for Israel'
Florida Atlantic University Middle East expert Robert Rabil visualized a worst-case scenario.

"Israel is the only country in the region currently with nuclear weapons capacity," he said. "By Iran developing nuclear weapons, that could change the entire political equation. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan would follow - the domino effect. The Israeli establishment isn't sure as to the timing and consequences of what could happen. This is a nightmare for Israel."

Iran's missiles cannot reach U.S. shores, but they can reach U.S. targets in the region.

"If Israel bombs, Iranian missiles would fly," Rabil said. "We have troops in the Persian Gulf within range of those missiles. We are trying to get out of Afghanistan and (Iran) could cause troubles for us there. And they will smuggle more missiles to Hezbollah and create much more trouble for Israel. They could create problems throughout the Gulf. The flow of oil could be affected and the world economy could tank."

FAU professor of international law Jeffrey Morton agreed the U.S. would be targeted. "If it happens we should batten down the hatches everywhere that is reachable by Iran," he said, although he wasn't sure Iran is developing a weapon or that bombs will fly.

For the moment, Israel appears to have opted for covert action against Iran. At least five Iranian nuclear scientists have been assassinated or died in mysterious circumstances since 2007. Computer worms have infected Iranian technology and other acts of sabotage delayed Iran's projects. The Iranians blame the Israeli intelligence service, Mossad.

Reportedly, some Israeli leaders want to stick to that strategy and not bomb Iran.

"What the military is concerned about is the day after a strike," Rabil said. "You have no way of stopping the retaliation that will come, not on your own terms. Terrorism will be employed. Not knowing what is going to happen next, that is the danger."

Hostile neighborhood

Even Israelis favoring an airstrike don't think that would end Iran's nuclear ambitions, only delay them.

"The only way to end those ambitions would be full-fledged invasion and occupation, a regime change," said Russell Lucas, a Florida International University professor of international relations. Such an invasion is apparently not on either the Israeli or U.S. agenda.

Morton suggested two possible reasons for the recent Israeli public statements.

"Maybe they are preparing their own people and the world for military action," he said. "But maybe they are talking about an increased likelihood of war to get Iran to slow down. It's a way to get third parties involved. One frustration for Israel is, whenever the world starts talking about Iran, something happens to cause a distraction. This puts it back on the front burner."

When Israel bombed nuclear reactors in Iraq in 1981, and Syria in 2007, it issued no obvious prior warning as it has this time. "They are advertising this because they really don't want to do this," said Ira Sheskin, a Middle East expert at the University of Miami.
But if Israelis are trying to involve the world community, how can diplomats convince Iran not to develop a weapon? Iran has the same key reason Israel has for wanting those weapons.

"Iran, like Israel, sees itself as being surrounded by enemies," said Lucas. "It has a number of neighbors it has had hostile relations with."

Until recent events in Iraq, Iran and Syria were the only countries in the region run by Shiite Muslims. Iran's relations with its Sunni neighbors are so bad, some of them are more hostile to Iran than to Israel, Sheskin said.

"The Saudis never said, 'Because Israel has nuclear weapons we need them,' " he said. "Now the Saudis are saying if Iran gets them, they will need them too. That's a Sunni-Shiite thing."

Iran weighing interests

It's also no secret that the West would like to see the end of a regime run by the ayatollahs.

"Iran is bordered by Afghanistan on one side and Iraq on the other and they are both places where lots of American troops have been recently," Sheskin said. "I can see why Iran might get nervous, although there is no reason to believe American troops would go into Iran."

The Islamic regime in Iran consolidated its power in 1979 by taking U.S. hostages and confronting President Jimmy Carter's administration. With unrest growing in the country, especially among its youth, the ayatollahs may use the issue of nuclear weapons to try to unify the nation, Lucas said.

"They can play the 'rally round the flag' card," he said. "In that case, lowering tensions with Israel would not serve their interests."

The rising tensions also occur in the midst of the worldwide economic recovery. "You don't want a war now that will send gas prices through the roof," said Lucas.

China, the largest buyer of Iranian oil, is particularly vulnerable.

"For China it is extremely important to have stability and an uninterrupted flow of oil," said Rabil. "I think probably the Chinese don't want to see a nuclear Iran. They have said recently that they are thinking of turning more to other countries for oil. So certain messages are being sent."

The hopes almost everywhere are that pragmatic heads will prevail and that no momentary event triggers war.

"This threat could become a self-fulfilling prophecy," Rabil said. "That's why I'm extremely worried."