

The Sum of all Fears: Israel's Perception of a Nuclear-Armed Iran

Thucydides' ancient logic still governs: uncertainty (over Iran's nuclear intentions) and the fear this inspires (in Israel) increases the risk of another war (in the Middle East). Even if Israel's response to the Iranian nuclear program does not lead the region into a war, Israel's fears will be crucial in shaping Middle Eastern politics and will help to determine the stability of the region in the years ahead.

The U.S. public has been hearing about Israeli fears of a nuclear Iran for several years. It is understandable if most Americans discount this drama as part of the background noise of international affairs—a constant feature of international reporting in which the story remains the same, and the dire predictions never pan out. But it is important to pay attention to Israeli concerns about Iran for several reasons.

First, Israel not only has a particular view of the threat posed by the military dimension of the Iranian nuclear program, it also has an independent means of taking action to alleviate its fears. Although Israel is less capable than the United States, if Israel were to launch strikes on Iran to set back the nuclear program, the effects would ripple across the region and beyond. Meir Dagan, former head of Israel's external intelligence agency, the Mossad, warned a number of times that an Israeli attack on Iran would “ignite a regional war.”¹

Second, Israel's anxieties over Iran could produce a series of defensive moves and escalating responses which spiral out of control in a manner that neither side

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intends. As the history of war and conflict in the Middle East—from the June 1967 Six-Day War to the November 2012 round of violence between Israel and the Gaza-based Hamas—reminds us, the Middle East is a tinderbox where a few sparks could all too easily ignite a major conflagration.

Finally, as President Obama's March 2013 visit to Israel demonstrated, Israel's fears of Iran have become an inescapable and urgent concern for U.S. policy in the Middle East. Given the U.S.–Israeli friendship, President Obama will need to pay close attention to these sensitivities toward Iran. A clear understanding of Israeli perceptions of Iran will remain essential to U.S. policy toward Tehran.

Israel's fear of an Iran armed with a nuclear weapon takes at least four distinct forms, with a diverse set of sources: fear of annihilation, fear of a more difficult security environment, socioeconomic fears, and fear of a challenge to Israel's founding ideological principles. Israelis generally frame these distinct fears as cumulative, not separate. The four layers of threat perception explain why most Israelis are willing to support their leaders' harsh line towards Iran. However, as we show below, the various fears also hold contradictions that explain internal Israeli divisions over the required response to Iran, such as the tension between Prime Minister Netanyahu and his security establishment. Any attempt to unpack Israel's framing of, and response to, the Iranian nuclear challenge should therefore begin with an analysis of these different fears.

Existential Fear

A March 2012 poll conducted by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs revealed that 66 percent of Israelis believe that “if Iran will acquire a nuclear weapon it would use it against Israel.” 77 percent of Israelis believe that the “Iranian threat would pose an existential threat to them.”² Israelis consider the possibility of their collective annihilation a real risk. At least in part, this is the result of the centrality of the Holocaust in the political life of the Jewish state, haunting nearly all public discussion of Iran in Israel. Polls ask flatly if a second Holocaust is possible or impossible should Iran get the bomb.³ Many Israelis ascribe annihilationist intentions to leaders of the regime in Iran. A December 2010 poll conducted by Tel Aviv University showed that 92 percent of Israeli Jews and 70 percent of Israeli Arabs view Iran as the most hostile state in the region.⁴

Polling data not only responds to the occasional inflammatory statements from Iranian leaders about wiping Israel from the pages of history; the responses also reflect what the public hears from its own leaders about the Iranian regime's revolutionary zeal, religious ideology (which for some, including former President Ahmadinejad, includes references to the imminent return of the Twelfth Imam, or Islamic savior), culture, and notions of rationality. The June 14

election in 2013 of former diplomat and national security advisor Hassan Rouhani as Iran's president did not affect Israeli statements about the Iranian threat, at least for now. In an interview just after the election, Prime Minister Netanyahu told Lally Weymouth of *The Washington Post* that, unfortunately, Rouhani's election as President "doesn't have the power to change Iran's nuclear ambitions. These are determined not by the elected president but by the so-called Supreme Leader, [Ayatollah Ali] Khamenei."⁵

Israeli political leaders frequently frame the Iranian threat by connecting it with the Jewish experience in Europe. Prime Minister Netanyahu famously declared in 2006, "It's 1938 and Iran is Germany. And Iran is racing to arm itself with atomic bombs."⁶ More recently, Prime Minister Netanyahu highlighted the Iranian issue during his address to the nation on National Holocaust Memorial Day in April 2013. In the speech, the Prime Minister stated that "the murderous hatred against the Jews has not passed from the world, but it simply was replaced by murderous hatred against the Jewish state . . . Iran openly declares its intention to destroy the State of Israel, and is using all means to achieve this goal."⁷

For some Israeli policymakers, the Iran–Holocaust connection is even more intimate. Former Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh lost his grandparents in the Holocaust; referring to Iran in an August 2012 interview, he said, "when I see again a connection between radical ideology and absolute military capability I tell myself . . . this is something that once annihilated a third of the Jewish people."⁸ Even some of Israel's more dovish leaders have held to this view—then-Foreign Minister Shimon Peres stated as early as 1995 that "Iran asks for the destruction of Israel."⁹ Almost two decades later Peres, now President, wondered in his April 2012 Holocaust Remembrance Day speech how the world can allow the Iranian leadership to "openly deny the Holocaust and threaten another Holocaust."¹⁰

Israeli leaders have described two pathways to an attack: either a direct strike by Iran, or an attack by a non-state actor who would acquire the weapon from Iran. Israeli leaders, such as former Defense Minister Ehud Barak, further stated that the country's narrow size and population density in its central sector might encourage Tehran to attack Israel. Barak referred a number of times to a 2001 speech by the former Iranian president, Hashemi Rafsanjani, that claimed the Jewish state is, as Barak put it, a "one bomb state," meaning that a single bomb could end Israel's existence.¹¹

The effect of the Holocaust is further amplified in the minds of many Israelis due to a common cyclical view of history. Drawing on both national and religious sources, many Israelis believe that "in every generation they rise against us to destroy us"—as the Passover Hagaddah states in a well-known passage. Benjamin Netanyahu referred a number of times to the annihilationist plans for Jews in the biblical book of Esther, perhaps because those plans were devised in the court of the ancient Persian Empire.¹² Going even further back, Moshe

Feiglin, now a member of Parliament representing the governing Likud party, wrote in February 2012 that the Iranian Amalek (a tribe described in various places in the Bible as a foe threatening enough to the Hebrews to warrant its extermination) and the German Amalek operated just as the biblical Amalek operated: “They have waged against us an existential war.”¹³

Fear of an Iranian bomb (or any rival armed with nuclear weapons) is further rooted in a belief among Israeli elites and the Israeli public that the region as a whole, with Iran in the forefront, rejects Israel’s legitimacy.

Strategic Threats

Framing the threat as existential makes it clear and simple, if dire. Current and former security officials have aired a more nuanced set of fears, describing the numerous ways that a nuclear-armed Iran would induce unfavorable changes in Israel’s immediate strategic environment.

First, many analysts believe that Iran armed with nuclear weapons would become an increasingly assertive regional power, seeking to expand its influence in both the Gulf region and the Levant. In such a circumstance, Iran might induce weaker neighbors to jump on the Iranian bandwagon, and confront Israel with a more aggressive and capable regional alliance. Here too, European analogies are rampant. Ehud Barak, Israel’s former Defense Minister, stated in an August 2012 interview to the Israeli paper *Haaretz* that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons, “no one will be able to stop it when it provokes neighbors and rivals. What happened in the Rhineland in 1936 will be child’s play compared to what happens with Iran.”¹⁴

Second, Iran might embolden its allies, like Syria (assuming a government friendly toward Iran survives the civil war) and non-state actors like Hezbollah, to pursue their aims with greater militancy—including the use of rocket attacks and terrorism against Israel—beneath the comfort of an Iranian nuclear umbrella. In an August 2012 interview, then-Defense Minister Barak said “if we will need to take action against Hezbollah and a nuclear Iran would declare that an attack on Hezbollah constitutes an attack on Iran, what we shall do then?” Barak further stated that non-state actors “cannot be deterred in the way that countries can exert deterrence against one another. The implications of such a development would be extremely grave.”¹⁵ This is not only an elite perspective. A March 2012 poll suggested that 75 percent of Israelis believe that if Iran develops nuclear weapons, “the Palestinians and Hezbollah will grow more belligerent toward Israel.”¹⁶

Third, some Israelis predict that a nuclear-armed Iran would induce nuclear and other WMD proliferation to additional states. Indeed, Barak stated that a nuclear Iran will bring an end to the global nonproliferation regime: “until now

the world found a way to deal with two rogue states: North Korea and Pakistan. If Iran goes nuclear...there will be no control over the nuclear demon.”¹⁷ Reflecting a widely shared assessment within the Israeli security establishment, in September 2012 former Director of Military Intelligence, Gen. (Ret.) Amos Yadlin told *Haaretz* that if Iran went nuclear, “proliferation is a near certainty: If Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and other states go nuclear, a multipolar nuclear system will come into being in the Middle East—and by definition this will be unstable and very dangerous.”¹⁸

Finally, although less frequently stated in public, some Israelis are concerned that a nuclear-armed Iran could undermine Israel’s own deterrent options, and could force Israel to reconsider its policy of nuclear opacity. Gen. (Ret.) Ami Ayalon, the former commander of the Israeli Navy and former head of Israel’s domestic security agency, Shabak, commented recently that the Israeli statements about the need for military action “puts the ambiguity of Israel’s nuclear status at risk.”¹⁹ Israeli leaders and analysts also fear a nuclear-armed Iran would weaken the U.S. posture in the Middle East, further diminishing the influence of Israel’s closest and most powerful ally.²⁰

The Socioeconomic Challenge

Israelis also perceive an adverse socioeconomic effect of an Iran armed with a nuclear weapon. Yarom Ariav, a former Director General of the Israeli Finance Ministry, told *Haaretz* in August 2012 that “a nuclear Iran involves considerable economic cost to Israel, from its effect on our economic rating to large security outlays.”²¹

Israelis are concerned that Iran armed with nuclear weapons would hinder the state’s ability to attract foreign direct investment (FDI). Columnist Lawrence Solomon articulated the concern:

You’re the CEO of IBM or Intel or Siemens or Nestlé or any one of the 500 other Western companies that have opened up operations in Israel, home to the developed world’s fastest-growing economy. What do you do should Iran get the bomb? Do you continue to invest in Israel, on the hope that Iran doesn’t make good on its promise to wipe it off the map? . . . [W]ould your top executives agree to stay in or relocate to Israel, knowing that they would be putting their families at risk of perishing in the same mushroom cloud that could snuff out the tiny country?²²

If this fear materialized, it would be a major problem for Israel: in 2010, 49 percent of its industrial exports (excluding diamonds) were from the globally oriented high-tech sector.²³ In turn, this sector is heavily dependent on external funding from R&D centers set in Israel by global giants like Microsoft and Google, purchases of Israeli firms by foreign firms, and venture capital funding from abroad. Indeed, Israeli economist Yair Aharoni reported that in 2005 over

50 percent of the output in R&D and communications equipment was produced in Israel by foreign direct investment-based enterprises.²⁴ The concern goes well beyond high-tech. Indeed, Aharoni showed that fifteen out of Israel's top 100 industrial and service companies are FDI-based enterprises that include not only technology companies but also food, metal, and paper producers. Correspondingly, employment in some sectors is heavily dependent on foreign direct investment. Almost half of the employees of the electronic communication sector and about a third of the basic metal sector worked in 2005 for FDI-based enterprises.²⁵

An additional socioeconomic fear is that a nuclear Iran would diminish Israel's ability to retain and attract the globally-oriented, highly qualified portions of its labor force, which are the main engines of Israel's economy. As Sneh put it in a 2012 interview to *Haaretz*, "The good mother from northern Tel-Aviv will tell her son that he does not have to come back from MIT, she will come to visit the grandkids in Boston."²⁶

A Challenge to Founding Principles

Finally, and perhaps least obvious but not least significant, a small number of Israeli analysts and officials have suggested that the potential of a nuclear attack on Israel undermines secular Zionism's credo of providing a safe haven for Jews. Moshe Halbertal, a professor of philosophy at the Hebrew University, told *The New Yorker's* David Remnick in September 2012, "If Netanyahu fails [to prevent Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons], in his terms the entire *raison d'être* of Israel falls apart—meaning, if we cannot face up to the new Hitler, who am I? Who are we?"²⁷

In his 2012 interview, Sneh said that an Iranian bomb could lead to the withering of Israel even if the bomb would not be used. In Sneh's opinion, even the possibility that Iran would use a nuclear weapon would halt Jewish immigration into Israel, deter foreign investment, and lead Israeli technological elite to leave the country. It would "be the beginning of the end of the Zionist dream."²⁸ This sentiment was echoed, albeit in disagreement, in a May 2012 interview with retired General Yishai Beer, who said that comparing Israel's current situation to the situation of Jews in 1939 is wrong because "it signals panic and as if the state of Israel failed in its historic role of providing physical security to Jews."²⁹

Inconsistencies and Tensions

Israeli fears have implications for policy. Precisely for this reason, Israeli perceptions deserve scrutiny. Several of the anxieties expressed above are riddled

with inconsistencies and internal tensions. First, one would expect that Israel's alarm would increase as Iranian capabilities increased, but this is not the case. Some Israeli politicians—notably Benjamin Netanyahu and Shimon Peres—expressed existential fears of Iran in the early and mid-1990s, well before Israeli intelligence estimates predicted Iranian capability was nearing new thresholds of danger. In the late 1990s, under Netanyahu's leadership, Israel reviewed its strategy toward Iran and concluded less antagonism would serve Israel's interests;³⁰ Netanyahu's statements in this period were far more muted—statements about the existential threat from Iran nearly disappeared—even in the face of criticism on Iran policy from opposition leaders. Though today, Iran truly is on the threshold of having the capability to produce a bomb, Shimon Peres has called publicly for less hyperbole about the Iranian nuclear threat.³¹

Surprisingly, Israel's alarm does not necessarily increase with Iranian capabilities.

Second, projecting the image of a victimized people facing the danger of annihilation does not square easily with Israel's warning that it is strong enough to carry out an effective attack without external operational assistance. Indeed, this contradiction has been underlined by critics of Prime Minister Netanyahu's frequent statements in recent years that Israel faces an existential threat. As former Mossad chief Ephraim Halevi said in a September 2012 interview, "I am absolutely appalled when I hear our leaders talking as though there were no Israel Defense Forces . . . and as though Auschwitz is liable to be repeated. As I see it, the message we should be conveying to the Iranians—and to ourselves—is that we will be here in any event and in any scenario for the next two thousand years."³²

Third, the fear that a nuclear Iran will command greater regional influence, causing Arab states to flock to its side, does not conform to widespread historical evidence that states tend to band together to oppose rising threats.³³ The theory that a nuclear-armed Iran would exert hegemonic influence in the region is also at odds with the common prediction that a nuclear Iran would provoke its neighbors to seek their own nuclear capabilities to counter Iranian influence.

Fourth, fears that a nuclear Iran will spur proliferation in the Arab world is contradicted by Israel's own experience with its neighbors, in which Israeli nuclear capability, which coincided with several armed conflicts for decades, did not spark others to seek a matching capability. (Neither Iraq nor Libya nor Iran was responding primarily to Israel's capability; Syria in the 2000s may be an exception.)

U.S. officials, particularly in Congress, should stop echoing the worst Israeli hyperbole.

Finally, fears that a nuclear Iran would undermine Israel's economy and Zionist purpose are flatly contradicted by the evidence. Iranian nuclear capability has grown for a decade, during which time Israel's economic growth has soared and emigration has dropped to a thirty-year low.³⁴

The inconsistencies and contradictions in Israeli statements about Iran should not be surprising. Beliefs reflect both our appraisals of reality and our desires to control it. "Seeing is believing" as the old adage goes, but we also

"believe what we want to believe." Since reality is complex and our theories for how best to manage what the world throws at us are imperfect, we often express inconsistent or contradictory beliefs. Political leaders are no different. And since rhetoric is a currency of power in domestic politics, alarm over Iran is undoubtedly expressed at times for partisan purposes. Nevertheless, policymaker perceptions of the threat from Iran carry enormous implications for the choices those individuals will make.

Consequences and Complications

The multiple layers of danger that Israelis see in an Iran armed with a nuclear weapon should be seen as cumulative, and not mutually exclusive. It is the "sum of all fears" rather than a single "clear and present danger." One important consequence is that, with a constant drumbeat of the danger posed by Iran, Israeli leaders have begun to persuade their constituents. In a March 2012 Israeli poll, 65 percent of Israelis said they believe that it will be more costly to live with a nuclear Iran than to attack Iran before it gets nuclear weapons.³⁵ Even if this statistic suggests greater support than actually exists, public opinion would not constrain the Israeli government should it choose to launch an attack on Iran.

However, the tensions between the different conceptions of the threat have also led to deep divisions over policy. The most significant gulf for now is between the Holocaust-based existential framing of the threat advanced by Prime Minister Netanyahu and the set of strategic threats outlined earlier that the security establishment highlights. This gulf, which leads to different policy prescriptions (attack before it is too late vs. wait and see how other delaying measures will play out), explains the recent and unprecedented tension between Israel's elected officials that favor an attack, and its military leadership that shuns one. The caution exercised by the military leadership may reflect its realist, capabilities-based assessment, as compared to the more historical,

ideological, and identity-based framework used by the Prime Minister. Contradictory conceptions of Iran also reverberate outward: a shared sense of strategic threat strengthens the alliance with the United States, but an existential imperative to attack against U.S. preferences puts the alliance at risk.

The discourse of fear carries with it several additional risks and complications. One is self-entrapment—allowing alarmist statements to “lock in” certain courses of action and close off alternatives. The widespread reliance on the Holocaust as a key to understanding the Iranian situation lends support for an attack even without Washington, as Israel also interprets the 1940s genocide as evidence for the need for self-reliance. Adding to the risk of entrapment is Israel’s nuclear ambiguity. Whereas another state might define red lines and issue deterrent threats, Israel cannot easily articulate its deterrent options in response to an Iranian strategic threat, leaving capitulation to Iranian nuclear capability and preventive force as poles of action with little in between. Dire threat statements also make it more difficult from a domestic political standpoint to have a healthy airing of options such as to contain a latent Iranian nuclear capability or even to negotiate a compromise with Tehran. The last few years saw close cooperation between the Israeli and U.S. security establishments to delay Iran’s nuclear progress, assuming David Sanger’s reports about joint Israeli–U.S. cyberattacks on Iran are correct.³⁶ If Israelis believe they are facing annihilation, will such joint efforts continue? Similarly, the Iranian threat creates a set of common interests between Israel and Arab states in the Gulf, but it remains unclear if Israel is indeed taking advantage of that situation.

A second risk is creating “self-fulfilling prophecies” through dire statements of threat. Inflated threat statements and associated calls for military action can help to create in Iran precisely the monster that is being depicted, by strengthening the people and organizations within Iran who are arguing for an operational nuclear deterrent. Eventually, continued emphasis on the existential nature of the Iranian nuclear threat also could have self-fulfilling dynamics within Israel, perhaps leading to a socioeconomic tipping point, causing both talent and finance to flee.

The pervasive fear of Iran carries other unintended consequences. National-religious thinkers and activists have been quick to grasp the ideological implication of secular Zionism’s expected failure. Member of Knesset Moshe Feiglin, the leading national-religious politician in the Likud party, is perhaps the clearest among these. In a 2011 post on his website, Feiglin wrote that “we did not come back to this land for security reasons. What is so safe in placing all

Different conceptions of the threat have also led to deep divisions over policy.

Jews in Ahmedinejad's nuclear sights...we came here to redeem the world through the kingdom of God...this is why this land was given to us...and from this destiny we draw our right for sovereignty in the whole land of Israel."³⁷

Implications

Four *do*'s and four *don't*'s for policymakers in the United States and beyond flow from this analysis:

First, don't bet on Israel's next move. The fears expressed in Israel's domestic debate are real and rooted, but so are divisions over how to respond. It is anyone's guess who will prevail in the struggle over how to respond to Iran.

Second, don't believe everything you hear. Politicians make statements for many reasons. Not every comparison of Iran and Nazi Germany needs to be heeded. Although Israeli fears may be genuine, the Holocaust analogies are deeply flawed and not a sound guide to policy. Although Prime Minister Netanyahu does draw on Jewish history as a compass, he has also used the framing of threats (terrorism, Iran) as a tool to garner political support.

Third, don't walk away. If Israel feels a growing sense of abandonment, it could cause an escalation of fears and precisely the kinds of responses that could be most destructive for Israel, U.S. policy, and the region.

Finally, don't feed fear. Talk is not cheap. U.S. officials, particularly members of Congress, should stop echoing the worst Israeli hyperbole about

Iranian capabilities and intentions. At the same time, it would help if Iranian officials stopped making ridiculous statements denying the Holocaust and declaring their desire to see the Zionist entity wiped from the pages of history. Israeli leaders should avoid boxing themselves into making unnecessary choices by giving voice to their deepest fears.

If policymakers avoid these pitfalls, what positive steps should they take to help rein in fears in Israel and across the region? First, the United States should quietly help Israel and its neighbors realize their common interests vis-à-vis Iran and build upon them—not so much to deepen Iran's isolation but to enable coordinated action in resolving the stalemate with Iran. The United States could facilitate, for example, a quiet exchange between security officials from Israel and other regional players to clarify their respective approaches to the emerging security environment and to discuss the kinds of transparency and oversight measures that might ultimately provide reassurance about Iran's nuclear intentions.

Israel's elected officials may favor an attack, but its military leadership shuns one.

Second, the United States should continue to coordinate its policies toward Iran with Israel. Despite the reported tensions between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu during the former's first term in office, relations between the professional policymaking establishments of the two countries have never been closer; this coordination will continue to reassure Israel and to encourage Jerusalem to act with restraint.

Don't bet on Israel's next move; it is anyone's guess.

Third, the United States should support cooperative frameworks which would allow the states of the Middle East to begin to discuss, face to face, principles of regional security. The proposal to convene a conference on a WMD-free zone in the Middle East may be a vehicle for initiating such discussions. The architecture for regional coordination and management of security in the Middle East does not exist today, and is difficult to imagine, but it will remain elusive unless the United States pushes like-minded states into discussions of the shared challenges they face. These discussions will eventually need to address the challenge of banning all weapons of mass destruction in the region.

Finally, and most urgently, the best way to address Israeli fears of Iran is for Washington to break the logjam in its bilateral relations with Tehran, enable Iran to clarify its past nuclear activities, accept negotiated limits on its nuclear activities, and move beyond the years of confrontation which have both undermined regional security and defined Israeli–Iranian relations.

Notes

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