

# FACING IRAN'S MILITARY NUCLEAR AMBITIONS: THE INTERNATIONAL CHALLENGE AND ISRAEL'S CONCERNS

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# **Facing Iran's Military Nuclear Ambitions: The International Challenge and Israel's Concerns**

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## **Preface**

This article is the outgrowth of a valuable project initiated by CERI on regional perspectives on the Iranian nuclear threat, which included both a seminar in Paris (December 2012) and articles that draw upon the presentations delivered. I was tasked with presenting Israel's perspective, to which I readily agreed, although presenting "an Israeli perspective" can be somewhat tricky in the context of the current debate. Unfortunately, some readers are likely to regard a "view from Israel" as an inherently biased perspective on this critical arms control dilemma, rather than an analysis of both the Iranian nuclear challenge and Israel's concerns from the perspective of an Israeli arms control expert.

My hope is that readers will not prejudge the analysis according to assumptions they might have about what an Israeli perspective implies. This is especially important for the first part of the article, which analyzes Iran's nuclear program and some of the reasons why it took so long for the international community to present a convincing case regarding Iran's non-compliance, and the negative effect this had on international efforts to stop

Iran. The analysis draws on in-depth research into the Iranian case, as well as broader nuclear arms control dilemmas.

The second part of the article is where the spotlight turns to Israel. It analyzes Israel's interests, calculations, fears, frustrations and predicaments when facing Iran's nuclear advances, especially against the backdrop of international efforts that have so far been unsuccessful in turning the situation around. This section zeros in on the nature and ramifications of Israel's greater visibility over the course of 2012, and analyzes aspects of the public debate in Israel on the question of a possible attack against Iran's nuclear facilities. It goes on to clarify some misconceptions regarding the source of Israeli-Iranian animosity, and the role of nuclear weapons in that context. It underscores that while Israel has a high stake in the success of international diplomatic efforts to stop Iran, it is not involved in this dynamic. Moreover, the strong international players that are leading these efforts are pursuing their own nonproliferation and security interests and concerns, as well as their global responsibility to uphold the NPT.

## **Iran's Nuclear Program: The Reason for Concern**

### ***The components of a nuclear weapons capability***

The grounds for concluding that Iran is working to achieve a military nuclear capability are by now very strong. While there is no evidence as yet of work on producing an actual nuclear device, there is little doubt that Iran has been advancing a military nuclear program for years, and is on the way to being able to produce weapons in short order if it should so decide. The work Iran has already carried out in this regard is a violation of the commitment it made when it joined the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) to remain non-nuclear.

Before moving to the evidence, it is worth recalling that a nuclear weapons capability has three components: the *stockpile of fissile material* (highly enriched uranium or plutonium) needed for an atomic explosion; the know-how and ability to assemble a *nuclear warhead* that can be placed atop a surface-to-surface missile; and the delivery system itself, which today normally refers to *long-range missiles* capable of carrying a nuclear warhead.

Iran has been working on all three components. Its ballistic missile program is advancing quite openly as Iran never made a commitment not to develop long-range missiles. While the fourth round of UN Security Council sanctions on Iran (Resolution 1929, June 2010) targeted its missile activity – banning Iran from participating in activities related to ballistic missiles, and the sale or transfer of missile related technology and/or components to Iran – still Iran does not hide what it is doing in this regard. Indeed, the Islamic regime has been flaunting its missile developments on

a regular basis for years, including the increasing ranges of its long-range surface-to-surface missiles, which span beyond the Middle East.

Conducting work on the warhead component, by contrast, is more of a challenge for Iran – it is both strictly prohibited by the NPT, and difficult to explain away with a civilian cover. If such work were to be exposed, it would constitute clear-cut evidence of bomb-making activity. This is why Iran has been careful to hide this activity, and assessments included in the famous US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) from late 2007, according to which there was a high probability that Iran had ceased work on a military nuclear program in 2003, were most likely referring to this component of Iran's program. Fearing that it could be next in line for US military attack (after Iraq), it would not be surprising if Iran decided at that time to put a stop to activity that would blatantly expose it as cheating on its NPT commitment. It is also quite plausible that Iran had already completed much of the work on this component by 2003/4. Moreover, IAEA suspicions today about activities that Iran has carried out at the Parchin military facility relate to this component of Iran's nuclear program. Yukiya Amano, Director-General of the IAEA, recently stated that the agency cannot rule out that Iran has continued to work on nuclear weapons technology up to the present.<sup>1</sup>

The final component of a deliverable nuclear weapon – the fissile material – involves the most time-consuming of the three activities. However, in another respect, accumulating fissile material presents less of a challenge to Iran than work on a warhead design, because it involves dual-use technology and can be explained as part of a civilian nuclear program. It is common for determined nuclear proliferators that are members of the NPT to abuse the "loophole" that grants Non-Nuclear Weapons States (NNWS) members the right to a civilian nuclear program, including the right to enrich uranium to produce fuel for reactors.<sup>2</sup> The fact that uranium enrichment can be applied to both a civilian and military program means that Iran can build-up stockpiles of low and medium enriched uranium under the guise of a civilian program, and at a time of its choosing transfer them to military uses.

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<sup>1</sup> Joby Warrick, "Iran may have continued weapons research after 2003, IAEA chief says", *Washington Post*, April 8, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> It is noteworthy that Article IV of the NPT states that "Nothing in this Treaty shall be interpreted as affecting the inalienable right of all the Parties to the Treaty to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination and *in conformity with Articles I and II of this Treaty*." (Emphasis added.) In Article II the non-nuclear weapons states undertake among other things: "not to manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices". In other words, the right that is granted to the NNWS is *conditional* on the state not working on a nuclear weapons program. Therefore, Iran's incessant claim that it has "an inalienable right" to enrich is not an accurate portrayal of the situation once its nuclear intentions are suspect.

## ***Evidence of Iran's military intentions***

In light of the above, it has been extremely difficult for the international community to present an ironclad case that Iran's explanations for its nuclear activities cannot be taken at face value. The fact that Iran has for so long been able to cultivate a measure of doubt with regard to the military component of its program has been a major constraint for international actors seeking to curb its nuclear ambitions. Because there are no clear benchmarks or criteria in the NPT for making a call of noncompliance, conclusions have hinged on how the evidence is interpreted, and this has played to Iran's clear advantage. By continually emphasizing the question marks, Iran ensured that doubts continued to resonate in international debates.

Ironically, Iran's ability to deceive the international community regarding its intentions was enhanced by the experience of another proliferator in the Gulf – Iraq. While it is today virtually undisputed that Iraq had worked on a military nuclear program in the 1980s, by the time the US attacked in 2003 – after years of highly intrusive inspections carried out by a special UN-mandated inspection team (UNSCOM) – WMD were not to be found. The intelligence failure in Iraq negatively impacted efforts to present a convincing case for Iran; suspicions regarding Iran's activities were often met with skepticism on the basis of simplistic and unsubstantiated comparisons with the Iraqi case.

Despite these constraints, by 2013 – indeed, already by 2008 – enough evidence has accumulated to make the case that Iran has clear military nuclear intentions. First, Iran has been exposed in acts of non-compliance and deception with regard to its nuclear activities. Specifically, two unreported facilities were exposed in the summer of 2002, which triggered the decade-long process of trying to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions. A third case of deception became apparent in late 2009 when evidence of a clandestine uranium enrichment facility (Fordow) was exposed.

Iran also has a history of lack of cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on important questions that the agency has with regard to past activities of a military nature. Iran claims to have cleared up these issues, but the IAEA reports otherwise. Moreover, the current outstanding issue is the suspected explosion testing activities carried out at Parchin, a military facility.<sup>3</sup> Iran allowed an IAEA inspection team into the facility in 2005 (partial access only), and has since repeatedly refused the IAEA further access claiming it is not required to do so in the case of a military facility. Over the course of 2012 and in early 2013, Iran led the IAEA to believe it would allow inspection of the facility, only to deny

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<sup>3</sup> See David Albright and Robert Avagyan, "Taking stock and moving forward on the issue of the Parchin high explosives test site", *ISIS Report*, January 25, 2013. <http://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/taking-stock-and-moving-forward-on-the-issue-of-the-parchin-high-explosives/>

inspectors access once they arrived in Iran.<sup>4</sup> Parallel satellite imagery of a major clean-up operation at the site over the course of 2012 – reminiscent of a similar razing of the Lavizan site in 2004, when the IAEA had suspicions about Iranian activities being conducted there – enhances the sense that Iran has something to hide.

The fact that the strong suspicions are emanating from the IAEA is significant, as the agency is the most neutral party among those confronting Iran. It is a technical organization with an inspections mandate. Indeed, the one time the IAEA was criticized for going beyond the bounds of a purely technical mandate was when former Director-General Mohammad ElBaradei openly supported adopting a more *lenient* approach towards Iran's suspected proliferation than the evidence warranted.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the IAEA employs inspectors of many nationalities, and the data gathered on the ground cannot easily be construed as biased national intelligence. And when the IAEA does receive intelligence from specific states, the information is independently evaluated and verified.

In early 2008, in a special closed meeting of the IAEA Board of Governors convened by then-IAEA Deputy Director-General Olli Heinonen, he presented to the board important evidence, some of which he found did not square with any other explanation save research into the development of a nuclear warhead.<sup>6</sup> This was a watershed moment, although it took almost four more years before the full annex of evidence regarding Iran's military activities in the nuclear realm was finally included in the November 2011 IAEA report on Iran.<sup>7</sup>

The final category that deserves mention here can be called evidence based on "analytic inference".<sup>8</sup> This refers to evidence that while not incriminating in and of itself, has no plausible explanation in the context of a civilian nuclear program, but can be well explained in the context of a clandestine military program. The outstanding pieces of evidence in this category are the configuration of the revealed Fordow enrichment facility, and the decision Iran took in February 2010 to begin enriching uranium to the level of 20 percent. The puzzle connected to the Fordow facility is that

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<sup>4</sup> See in this context Diane Barnes, "Deadlock persists on Iran nuclear probe", *Global Security Newswire*, January 18, 2013. <http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/iran-iaea-nuclear-probe/>

<sup>5</sup> I refer here to the issue of the famous "secret annex" on Iran – namely, the full file of information that the agency had collected on Iran's nuclear program – which ElBaradei refused to include in his open reports on Iran lest they provide grounds for Israel to attack Iran militarily. Over the course of 2009, prior to ElBaradei's replacement by Yukiya Amano, this emerged as a highly contentious and controversial issue.

<sup>6</sup> This is how Heinonen was quoted in the media. See Joby Warrick and Colum Lynch, "UN Says Iran May Not Have Come Clean on Nuclear Past," *Washington Post*, March 2, 2008, [www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2008/03/01/AR2008030101722.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2008/03/01/AR2008030101722.html).

<sup>7</sup> This was after Yukiya Amano replaced ElBaradei as Director-General of the agency. For the November 2011 report see: [http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/IAEA\\_Iran\\_8Nov2011.pdf](http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/IAEA_Iran_8Nov2011.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> These categories of evidence appear in concise form in Emily B. Landau, "Does Iran have an 'Inalienable Right' to enrich uranium?" *INSS Insight*, No. 376, October 22, 2012.

it was constructed with room for only approximately 3000 centrifuges. This is a number far below what would make sense in the context of a civilian nuclear program (by way of comparison, the Natanz facility has room for 54,000 centrifuges). However, a configuration of 3000 centrifuges does make perfect sense in the context of a clandestine military program. If low enriched uranium (LEU) were to be transferred to Fordow clandestinely, 3000 centrifuges could turn out an amount of high-enriched uranium (HEU) that would be sufficient for one to two nuclear devices each year. Iran had meant for the Fordow facility to be kept secret, therefore the military explanation is the one that should be preferred.

As for uranium enrichment to 20 percent, when Iran began to enrich to this level, it claimed that it was in need of fuel for its small research reactor near Tehran – the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR). However, several months earlier Iran had been offered a fuel deal by the P5+1 (October 2009) according to which it would be supplied with this very fuel in return for shipping out some 75 percent of its LEU stockpile. Iran refused the deal. Moreover, Iran did not even possess the necessary technology for converting 20 percent enriched uranium into fuel rods for the TRR. In this case as well, an unconvincing civilian explanation must be evaluated against a very convincing military explanation, namely, that 20 percent enrichment takes a determined proliferator about 80 to 90 percent of the way to the above-90 percent enrichment (HEU) required for a nuclear weapon.

### ***Waiting for Iran's decision to move to production?***

Despite the evidence of a military nuclear program, the debate on Iran has recently coalesced around whether Iran has taken a decision to move to actual production of nuclear weapons. The emphasis on this decision, as the deciding factor for the United States to move to a new level of determination – perhaps even considering military action – could be self-defeating. Waiting for evidence of this decision could mean waiting until it is too late to stop Iran. First, the decision-making moment could easily be missed. More importantly, Iran could also continue to build up vast quantities of the three components of a deliverable nuclear weapon separately, without making a decision to move to actual production of weapons. It could spread these activities to additional facilities<sup>9</sup>, slowly building up an infrastructure that would eventually constitute a *fait accompli*. The international community could find itself in a situation where after years of saying that "it is too early", it would suddenly be "too late" to do anything to stop an Iranian decision to proceed to production.

A final point is that placing the onus on the actual decision misses the point that the different forms of pressure that the international community is

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<sup>9</sup> Some could be small and clandestine enrichment facilities, for secretly enriching uranium to weapons grade levels. See Ray Takeyh, "The best red line for a nuclear Iran", *Washington Post*, March 31, 2013.

applying to Iran – harsh and biting economic sanctions as well as threats of military consequences – have a role to play in the bargaining process with Iran. Talk of military consequences should not be regarded necessarily as a prelude to immediate action. Rather, a show of credible determination is needed at the stage when Iran can still be convinced to alter its cost-benefit analysis and return to the negotiating table as a serious partner looking for a deal. In this respect as well, waiting for an Iranian decision means waiting until it would be too late to stop Iran. The opportune moment to apply strong pressure on Iran would be well before it moves to the production stage.

## **Israel facing Iran's nuclear advances**

### ***Israel: the nervous bystander***

Israel is not, and never has been a direct player in international efforts to present Iran with evidence of its military nuclear program, while exposing its deception and cheating in the nuclear realm, nor has it participated in the decade-long efforts to negotiate a deal that would bring Iran back to the fold of the NPT. Evidence pointing to Iran's work on a military nuclear program relates to the commitment it made several decades ago to remain non-nuclear in line with its membership in the international Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty – the NPT. As such, this is an issue that is being dealt with at the international level, by the players who hold responsibility for ensuring member states' compliance with the NPT. This setup precludes any role for Israel in these international efforts, nor is the responsibility for curbing Iran's ambitions on its shoulders.

Nevertheless, over the course of the past decade, the international and regional dimensions of Iran's nuclear challenge have gotten tangled and sometimes confused. The nature of the crisis is such that while Iran's NPT violation must be dealt with at the international level (through international organs like the IAEA and the UN Security Council) the actual threat that emanates from that violation points in other directions, specifically toward the Middle East and Israel in particular. This creates a situation in which the responsibility for success in curbing Iran's military ambitions lies with entities that are the least affected by the adverse implications of their failure to stop Iran from becoming a nuclear state. By the same token, those that would be most affected by such a failure are entities that have the least control over the process of confronting Iran.

This setup goes to the essence of Israel's predicament when facing Iran's nuclear ambitions, and explains why it often projects a sense of desperation when trying to get the relevant international actors to feel the same degree of pressure to live up to their responsibility to stop Iran, that Israel feels in the face of the threat of their possible failure. The fact that Israel is a forced bystander when it stands to lose the most from failure of international efforts is the backdrop for Israel's keen sense of frustration.

Despite this situation, for years Israel nevertheless maintained a fairly consistent policy of open and ongoing support for international efforts to stop Iran through diplomacy. This does not mean that Israel has been entirely passive, however. In addition to periods when it issued its own deterrent threats to Iran, raising fears that it might take military action against Iran's facilities, it is also suspected of having carried out, together with the US and perhaps others, acts of sabotage against Iran's program. The activities regularly attributed to Israel range from action to ensure that Iran purchased faulty equipment on the international market, to the computer virus stuxnet, including various mysterious explosions that occurred at different facilities connected with Iran's nuclear program and the killing of nuclear scientists involved in Iran's illicit activities. Still, even if Israel was involved in these activities, they were always a sideshow to the major effort that was conducted at the international diplomatic level – an effort that Israel supported, although one in which it had no active role.

### ***2012: Israel moves to the forefront***

A noticeable departure from this pattern occurred over the course of 2012, when Israel's more vocal stance on Iran's nuclear advances became quite apparent, with stronger than ever hints that Israel might be on the verge of taking military action against Iran's nuclear facilities. The trigger for this change is to be found in a combination of factors, which center on Netanyahu's particular style as prime minister, exacerbated by the fact that by the time he entered the scene (2009) it was after years of failed international efforts to deal with Iran successfully through negotiations. Throughout those years, Iran continued to steadily push forward its nuclear program, while displaying ever-increasing defiance and counter-demands when facing the international community on this issue.

But the immediate trigger for Israel's more high-level profile over the course of 2012 was no doubt the release of the IAEA report on Iran in early November 2011. As noted, this report included for the first time the full annex of information on the military aspects of Iran's nuclear activities at the disposal of the IAEA, and was an important milestone along the route of clarifying Iran's military ambitions.<sup>10</sup> After the release of this report, questions regarding whether Iran really had military ambitions in the nuclear realm became moot.

What was Netanyahu advocating in 2012? In the closing months of 2011, together with Defense Minister Ehud Barak, Netanyahu began openly and emphatically calling for a much more severe international approach to be adopted, with specific focus on the need for stepped-up economic sanctions against Iran. But this message of urgency began to have clear

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<sup>10</sup> See: [http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/IAEA\\_Iran\\_8Nov2011.pdf](http://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/IAEA_Iran_8Nov2011.pdf)

overtones regarding the prospect that Israel itself might be on the verge of a decision to militarily attack Iran's nuclear facilities.<sup>11</sup>

While Netanyahu and Barak maintained a very high profile on this issue in the early months of 2012, they receded somewhat to the background when another round of P5+1-Iran negotiations began in April. This round lasted for three months (April to June), and following the failure to make any headway, Netanyahu's message began to evolve in a new direction – away from Israel and toward the United States. Perhaps in an attempt to exploit the upcoming US elections, and Obama's need to find favor among Israel's supporters, Netanyahu's emphasis shifted over the summer of 2012 to overt pressure on the administration to back up its conviction to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons with a clear redline for US military action. The new message met with a rather harsh US response as Obama pressed back by clarifying that his administration would not be setting redlines or deadlines on the Iranian nuclear issue. In his late September address to the UN General Assembly, Netanyahu seemed cognizant of the fact that his effort had backfired; this was apparent when he signaled that he was backing away from open conflict with the US over the issue of redlines. He clarified that Israel would not be pressing on this issue until spring or summer of 2013, with the implicit message that the new US administration would not face Israeli opposition if it made one more attempt at negotiating with Iran.

Following the reelection of both Obama and Netanyahu (November 2012 and January 2013, respectively), and yet another failed round of negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran in the early months of 2013 (Almaty, Istanbul, Almaty), it remains to be seen if and how Israel returns to the scene on the Iranian issue. Observers will be watching to see whether there is renewed pressure on the US, and/or practical preparations for a military strike; or whether Israel has taken the decision to follow the American lead. One of the missing pieces of the puzzle is what was communicated between Obama and Netanyahu during Obama's high-profile visit to Israel in late March 2013. One possibility is that some measure of understanding was reached between the two leaders on the best approach to Iran, and perhaps to Syria as well, on the basis of assessments in the two countries that, as Obama underscores at every turn, are virtually identical.

The overall record of Israel's more prominent and vocal stance in 2012 is mixed. On the one hand, it seems that the fear that Israel might actually take military action did provide the impetus in early 2012 for the US and especially the EU to finally move decisively to increased pressure on Iran.<sup>12</sup> They did this by putting in place a new set of crippling sanctions – including targeting the Central Bank, and a comprehensive oil embargo by the EU – which are steps that they had been reluctant to implement for fear

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<sup>11</sup> See for example, "Israeli leaders seen pushing for Iran strike", *Global Security Newswire*, November 2, 2011 (on the eve of the release of the IAEA report).

<sup>12</sup> European experts and diplomats tend to agree this is the case in private conversations.

of antagonizing Iran and the negative implications for their own economies. On the other hand, the conflict that developed with the US over the redline issue was indication that Netanyahu had taken things a step too far, risking political backlash in terms of US-Israeli relations, while not helping the case for dealing with Iran. This is most likely the explanation for the prime minister's abrupt about-face in late September 2012 at the UN annual event. Another negative result of Israel's new prominence was a distortion of the entire dynamic – namely, it began to seem as if the primary danger was the prospect of Israel taking military action against Iran, rather than the implications of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons.

### ***Israel: the internal debate***

Interestingly enough, the prospect of Israeli unilateral military action against Iran's nuclear facilities was anything but popular in Israel. The Israeli public did not seem to be buying into Netanyahu's rhetoric about Israel being thrust back to Nazi Germany, not because they rejected the idea that Iran was moving toward a bomb or that the regime has sinister plans, but rather for the simple reason that Israelis seem quite confident that Israel is capable of warding off an existential attack with its nuclear deterrent. Therefore, comparisons to the Holocaust are viewed as unwarranted, and not generally accepted. Israelis were similarly not convinced that Israel in late 2011, early 2012 was nearing a juncture where it would have no choice but to attack on its own, nor did they embrace Barak's concept of a "zone of immunity", which refers to the point where Iran's nuclear program would be invulnerable to Israeli military attack because the deeply-buried Fordow enrichment facility would be impenetrable to Israel's bombs.

In the wake of the new urgency projected by Israel's prime minister and defense minister, a fierce public debate among experts on the question of whether this trend was justified or not was carried out in the media, with most cautioning against an Israeli attack, although for different reasons. Some emphasized the severity of the expected Iranian response, some highlighted the fact that this was not coordinated with the United States, some thought that a delay of a few years was not worth the risks, and some emphasized the advantages of covert means of sabotaging Iran's program.

The case against an Israeli attack, which resonated strongly with the Israeli public, came from high level and prominent ex-security establishment figures, like ex-Mossad chief Meir Dagan. Dagan came out emphatically against the idea of Israel taking overt military action against Iran's facilities, especially if this was in direct opposition to the US. Again, this should not be understood as an indication that these ex-officials, or Israelis more generally, made light of the threat of a nuclearizing Iran – quite the opposite. Their point rather was that there were other considerations, and

perhaps better means, of confronting this challenge that Israel would be wise to adhere to.<sup>13</sup>

In assessing the position of the Israeli public, it is important to keep in mind a number of relevant insights. First, the public tends to take a stand only when the issue is played up by decision-makers and the media. Thus, public opinion polls taken in late 2011 and early 2012—at the height of the obsessive media attention to this issue – might not be the best indication of Israeli sentiments on the Iranian issue. When asked at the time whether Israel should attack Iran’s nuclear facilities – without giving any specifics regarding the scenario – the media reported that the population was evenly split.<sup>14</sup> But in the election campaign held 12 months later – after Netanyahu himself had backed away from the issue in his public rhetoric – there was hardly mention of the Iranian threat by any of the contending parties.

The second point is that Israelis tend to take their cue on security issues from current and ex-security establishment officials, and this topic is no different in that respect. In fact, because it involves strategic capabilities, the tendency to rely on their expertise might be even stronger. However, there were security experts both supporting an attack and rejecting this course of action, which could account for some confusion in the public sphere. Ehud Barak is a politician, but his opinions on security matters gained some legitimacy due to his past security credentials. Therefore, the more dominant trend in Israeli thinking is not to take an open and decisive stand on this issue, and to leave the challenge to the security experts.

On one point, however, the Israeli public seems to have a more clearly formed opinion, and that regards the salience of US-Israeli relations. Israelis seem to be particularly wary of the country positioning itself at the forefront of international efforts against Iran, particularly in a manner that goes against the wishes of the United States. A public opinion poll in March 2012 showed that a significant majority of Israelis – 58 percent – opposed attacking Iran’s nuclear facilities without US backing, a sentiment reflected in an additional poll taken in late summer.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Herzog has related to this: "Most Israelis believe that Iran is bent on acquiring nuclear weapons. They also regard a nuclear-armed Iran as a mortal threat to their country’s future and are highly skeptical that international sanctions and diplomacy will curtail Iran’s aims. Therefore the debate focuses on the cost-effectiveness of a unilateral Israeli strike (in both strategic and practical terms), as well as its timing and potential impact on US-Israeli relations." Michael Herzog, "Israel debates a strike on Iran", *Policy Watch* 1973, August 17, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> The poll reported 41 percent in support of attack and 39 percent opposed. "Haaretz poll: Israelis evenly split over attacking Iran", *Haaretz*, November 3, 2011. On the general difficulty in coming to conclusions on the basis of polling – in part due to the way in which the question is posed each time – see: Anshel Pfeffer, "Do Israelis support a war on Iran?", *Haaretz*, April 1, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> See "Haaretz poll: Most of the public opposes an Israeli strike on Iran", *Haaretz*, March 8, 2012. This finding was consistent with an additional poll conducted in August 2012, with 61 percent reported to oppose a unilateral Israeli attack, without cooperation with the US: "Poll: Most Israelis oppose attack on Iran nuclear facilities" *Haaretz*, August 16, 2012.

## ***Iran-Israel relationship: no balance, no symmetry***

When trying to comprehend Israel's official position on Iran, specifically its attitude toward the nuclear issue, it is easy to fall into the trap of assuming that the Iran-Israel situation is characterized by symmetry – regarding the two states' adversarial relationship, and specifically on the nuclear issue. Outsiders often assume that there must be some issue in dispute between the two that is driving the mutual animosity and hostility, and that if Iran is attempting to achieve nuclear weapons, it must be because it feels the need to create a balance with Israel's assumed nuclear capability – which is threatening Iran.

There are, however, no real grounds for making these assumptions. In fact, the adversarial relationship between the two countries is a direct product of the change in Iran that came with the Islamic revolution of 1979. Until the revolution, it is well known that relations between Israel and Iran were relatively good, especially in comparison to the conflictual relations that characterized Israel's situation vis-à-vis its Arab neighbors. In 1979, Israel – together with the United States – was simply targeted as "the enemy" by Iran as a direct result of the ideological and religious precepts that assumed center stage in the new Islamic regime.

Israel and Iran have no territorial dispute, no historical grievances, and there is no apparent geopolitical or strategic basis for the ardent hatred that Iran has directed towards Israel since 1979. The change was internally driven, and had nothing to do with Israel's behavior as such. The extreme animosity toward Israel – the horrific rhetoric employed by the current regime when relating to Israel (the "Zionist entity"), including repeated declarations that Israel has no place in the region – is not matched by Israeli rhetoric towards Iran. There is no evidence of mirror-imaging in this regard, and Israel's leaders have stated repeatedly that they have no quarrel with the Iranian people. Israel's threats are directed specifically to the nuclear facilities that Israel fears could provide Iran's leaders with the means to carry out their existential threats towards Israel. A factor that significantly complicates Israel's security conundrum when facing Iran is that because Iran's attitude toward Israel is ideologically and religiously driven, Israel has no means of mitigating the extreme hatred that it is subjected to. Obviously, this compounds Israel's sense of frustration when facing Iran's nuclear ambitions.

The claim that Iran is merely attempting to balance the threat from Israel in the nuclear realm is similarly without basis. A recent attempt to make the case that Iran's nuclear program is all about restoring balance to the Middle East after Israel upset it more than forty years ago was attempted by a leading International Relations theoretician, Kenneth Waltz.<sup>16</sup> As explained in a detailed response to his article, this analysis is flawed on

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<sup>16</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, " Why Iran should get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing would mean Stability" *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2012.

many counts, all tied to the theoretician's attempt to apply "pure" theoretical concepts to a region he seems to have little knowledge of. The history of nuclear programs in the Middle East tells a very different story.<sup>17</sup>

Israel embarked on the nuclear route in order to achieve what its first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, regarded as the ultimate insurance policy against any attempt to challenge its very existence; Israel's record for over four decades of being an assumed nuclear state underscores that this is the sole purpose of its ambiguous nuclear deterrent. For Iran's part, its original motivation for restarting its military nuclear program in the mid to late 1980s was to balance Iraq, not Israel. Today Iran is primarily motivated by its regional hegemonic ambitions, while rejecting Israel's very existence in the Middle East on a regular basis.<sup>18</sup> So the Israel-Iran dynamic is not a bilateral nuclear balancing act. Instead, each state is acting in accordance with its own very different agendas, which do not hinge in a symmetrical manner on each other.

### ***Would a nuclear Iran constitute an existential threat to Israel?***

The final issue to consider with regard to Israel's position on Iran's nuclear program is whether – if all efforts to stop Iran fail – Iran armed with nuclear weapons would constitute a threat to Israel's very existence in the Middle East. Some in Israel would not hesitate to firmly declare that such an outcome is a direct, potentially immediate existential threat to Israel. Others would mitigate that message somewhat, but would be hesitant about ruling out the possibility that Iran might – in an act of desperation or moment of religious fervor and irrationality – opt to use nuclear weapons against Israel in a first strike. Israel's concerns in this regard are enhanced by factors that go to its security culture, which is fueled by the history of severe threats and violence that Jews have suffered for generations and that have become deeply ingrained and entrenched in the security outlook of Israelis and Jews more widely speaking.<sup>19</sup>

A third group would maintain that Iran is not an existential threat to Israel. It is essential to understand, however, that this position is not driven by an assessment that Iran is not hateful, aggressive, or bent on Israel's destruction. Rather, the position draws on assessments regarding Israel's ability to deter an existential threat. This group would argue that considering that Israel itself is an assumed nuclear state that has practiced

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<sup>17</sup> Emily B. Landau, "When Neorealism Meets the Middle East: Iran's Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons in (Regional) Context", *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 15, No. 3, November 2012, pp. 27-37.

<sup>18</sup> Iran regularly refers to Israel as an illegal, criminal, and cancerous entity that has no place in the Middle East. For one of many examples, see: Nasser Karimi, "Iran's Ahmadinejad: No place for Israel in region," Associated Press, August 26, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> See Emily Landau and Tamar Malz, *Culture and Security Policy in Israel*, EuroMeSCo papers, no. 21, March 2003. 19 pp.

nuclear deterrence against potentially existential-minded foes in the Middle East for quite some time, there are no grounds for concluding that a nuclear Iran would not be similarly deterred by Israel's implicit threat of devastation in the face of first use of WMD against it. In order to be viable over the long term, this position critically depends on Israel's continued status as an assumed nuclear state.

But the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran should not end with discussion of whether it would pose an existential threat, or whether Iran would actually use nuclear weapons against Israel. The more likely scenario is that Iran would exploit the image of being a nuclear state as a cover for carrying out dangerous and hegemonic-driven steps in the Middle East. In other words, secure in the knowledge that no state would want to stand up to it coercively once it became a nuclear state, Iran would gain a strong measure of invulnerability to counterattack in response to its aggressive and violent regional behavior. Indeed, short of actual use of nuclear weapons, Iran would most likely be immune to military responses, and it would certainly be able to stir up a considerable amount of trouble in the region beneath the nuclear threshold. The lesson of Libya – attacked by NATO after giving up its WMD programs – was certainly not lost on Iran. But Iran was most likely aware of this insight well before Gaddafi fell.

## **Concluding remarks**

One of the unfortunate results of the current stage of efforts to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions is that this global non-proliferation challenge has come to be regarded by many as "Israel's problem." They complain that Israel is pressing the US to "do Israel's work for it"; others seem to believe that if Israel were only to concede something on the Palestinian front, the US would be more willing to do what needs to be done on Iran.

These new strands in the debate reflect a fundamentally distorted view of the issue that has gained traction in the public sphere. But the Iranian nuclear challenge is first and foremost a threat to the international community that is committed to nuclear nonproliferation through the NPT. If Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons this would seriously undermine the entire nonproliferation regime. As Obama stated very clearly in 2012, dealing with Iran's military nuclear ambitions is a US national security interest.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, it is a US and global nonproliferation concern, compounded by Iranian hegemonic threats and the danger of increased motivation among additional regional states to proliferate as well. In terms of the threat that Iran presents, it extends well beyond Israel to the entire

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<sup>20</sup> See Obama's speech in March 2012 at the AIPAC annual policy conference: "A nuclear-armed Iran is completely counter to Israel's security interests. But it is also counter to the national security interests of the United States. Indeed, the entire world has an interest in preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon."  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/mar/04/obama-aipac-speech-read-text>

Middle East; some Arab states have made this quite clear in recent years, albeit usually in quiet and private settings.<sup>21</sup>

The difficulties that international negotiators are experiencing when trying to get Iran to change course have nothing to do with Israel, or any concessions that Israel might make in other spheres. Rather, these constraints are firmly grounded in the stubborn characteristics of the negotiations setting as such. The international actors that are trying to get Iran to back away from its nuclear ambitions through negotiations and diplomacy face an inherent disadvantage by virtue of the structure of the talks: namely, that Iran has no need of negotiations and can proceed on its own to nuclear weapons, whereas the US and European negotiators are dependent on a negotiated settlement to achieve their goal of stopping Iran. This is the essence of the structural weakness that the international actors must redress if they want to get Iran to be serious about negotiating a deal.

Finally, the United States and its European partners are not primarily doing Israel a favor by confronting Iran with determination. Instead, they are living up to their own responsibility to stop this defiant proliferator from undermining the nonproliferation regime and threatening their Western allies in the Middle East. Israel obviously has a very strong stake in their success, but the prominent actors involved in these efforts are following their own interests, and fulfilling their own responsibility as permanent members of the UN Security Council to uphold this international treaty.

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<sup>21</sup> Probably the most well-known statement in this vein was revealed in late 2010 via Wikileaks: secret US cables exposed that Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah had repeatedly urged the US to strike Iran's nuclear facilities, to "cut off the head of the snake."