

MERIA

AN ISRAELI PLAN B FOR A NUCLEAR IRAN

By Ofer Israeli*

Assuming that Iran does indeed obtain nuclear weapons and Israel doesn't launch an attack on its facilities, what is Israel's "plan B" to deal with the new situation? This article analyzes the issue.

INTRODUCTION

Despite substantial sanctions designed to curb its nuclear program, Iran has refused to bend to international pressure. It has consistently violated U.N. resolutions calling for it to abandon its uranium enrichment and has continually managed to trick the skilled inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).¹ There have also been far-reaching Israeli efforts to stop Iran from becoming nuclear. Nonetheless, Iran may indeed acquire a nuclear arsenal.² Such a scenario would pose a serious threat to the Jewish state and would require it to take immediate action.

While neither the diplomatic channel nor sanctions guarantee success, so a limited military assault--Israeli, American, or a joint one--would not necessarily prevent Iran from acquiring the bomb.³ Instead, a military assault could lead Tehran to toughen its positions, act firmly to silence the opposition movements, rally the Iranian masses around President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and provide the ayatollahs with the necessary domestic support to continue its pursuit of nuclear power.⁴ A nuclear Iran would be dangerous to Israel and its containment difficult, but Jerusalem would have no choice but to attempt to contain a nuclear Iran and to reduce the risks as much as possible.⁵

Before Iran becomes nuclear, and especially if and once it does, Jerusalem should clearly delineate to Tehran and the international community its red lines, which if crossed would automatically lead to an Israeli response. The first would be to make clear the

consequences of Tehran's use of the bomb against Israel. Israel must display its strategic arsenal before Tehran. Jerusalem should also rely on a triple American-British-French nuclear umbrella, with which it should sign protection agreements very soon, before Tehran were to acquire the bomb.

This proposed strategy also seeks to reduce the severe regional and global consequences of a nuclear Iran. Jerusalem should make clear to other hostile actors in the region that an Iranian bomb would not provide them with protection. Jerusalem should also act decisively toward the friendly Western capitals, some of which may conclude it best to "abandon the sinking Israeli ship" before its decline and strengthen their relations with Tehran instead.

Thus, Israel must develop two parallel yet separate strategic channels. Even if the chances of preventing Iran from developing the bomb are slim, Jerusalem should adhere to its efforts. Moreover, despite Iran's built-in advantages of land and population, Israel could successfully cope with its nuclearization. This, however, would require the development of an innovative and effective strategy.

AN ISRAELI PLAN B FOR A NUCLEAR IRAN: BACKGROUND

Iran is influenced by radical Islamist Shi'i ideology and has acted decisively to achieve regional power status. The country has not been deterred by the United States, despite American forces stationed on Iran's borders, a clear manifestation of this ambition.⁶ Under

the shah's regime, Iran had already turned to the nuclear option. After the Islamic Revolution, however, the plan was abandoned, since Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini believed nuclear weapons were against Islamic law. Yet following its war with Iraq in the 1980s, when Iran was attacked with chemical weapons and the international community largely ignored this offense, Tehran decided to return to the nuclear option.⁷ For Iran, a nuclear arsenal serves several purposes: to obtain status as a regional power, to impress potential followers and allies in the region, to deter any attack on Iran in retaliation for its foreign activities, and to build national pride and fear among the opposition so as to ensure the regime's power at home.⁸

A nuclear Iran would be dangerous to Israel, as Tehran could adopt a more aggressive policy toward Israel. Consequently, the strategic environment within which Israel presently operates would totally change.⁹ During the first phase after becoming nuclear, Tehran might consider testing Jerusalem's limits. It could encourage its proxies, Hizballah and Hamas, under the protective Iranian nuclear umbrella, to begin extensive operations against Israel. This could include the launching of thousands of missiles and rockets into population centers and at strategic targets. Jerusalem, therefore, must draw clear red lines. At the same time, Israel should be ready for an automatic and strong response by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) against any provocation by Iran's proxies, which could lead Tehran and its agents to adopt more moderate behavior.

An Israeli "plan B" for a nuclear Iran must deal with two types of threats. The first would include three major actions: first and foremost, the use of Iran's nuclear power directly against Israel; second, the transfer of a nuclear device from Tehran's hands to terrorist organizations, which would then use it directly against Israel; and third, heightened attacks on Israel--notably by Hizballah and Hamas--inspired by a belief in Iran's new power. The second type of potential threat involves four lower level risks: 1) Iranian leaders' threats to destroy Israel; 2) the sale of nuclear know-how to

countries hostile to Israel, such as Syria; 3) convincing the Gulf states to jump onto the Iranian bandwagon, instead of balancing it; and 4) the expansion of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.

No less serious would be the political-military propaganda resulting from the Israeli failure to contain Tehran. Nuclear Iran would fully exploit its new position. Its leaders would mock and attack the failed Israeli policy. Jerusalem's stated policy since the early 2000s that "Israel will not accept a nuclear Iran" would be portrayed as empty threats and Israel a "paper tiger." Such propaganda could be detrimental to Jerusalem's status, and this element should not be played down. Israel's rivals in the Middle East could interpret this as a rare opportunity and may then adopt an aggressive policy accompanied by defiant and threatening acts. Jerusalem's few allies in the international arena may choose to stay away, seeing Israel's days as numbered. Each of these developments would significantly increase the threat directed toward the Jewish state.

While Iran is a dangerous and persistent rival, it is also well aware of its limitations of power, seeks to preserve its strength, and knows that it operates within an area of regional and international hostility.¹⁰ Moreover, if Jerusalem takes the necessary steps before Iran goes nuclear, it could successfully reduce the risk from its eastern border and have relative security.

Extent and Quality of Iranian Nuclear Arsenal and Degree of Risk to Israel

The degree of risk a nuclear Iran would pose to Israel depends directly upon the extent and the quality of its nuclear arsenal and launching capabilities. Iran as "a nuclear threshold state" constitutes a much smaller threat than an actual nuclear Iran. Even a small nuclear arsenal might make Iran believe it could launch a successful first strike on Israel.¹¹ An Iran that thought it possessed a reliable second-strike capability--even if that assessment were wrong--would be even more dangerous.¹²

As long as Iran holds limited-launching capabilities, covering only Israel's territory, its containment would be difficult, since France, Britain, and the United States would remain outside the direct threat. Nuclear weapons launched from Iran would not threaten them directly, and they would not be bound to attack first. This could lead them to adopt a "sit and do nothing" policy. During this transition period, Jerusalem would need to act decisively, even if at the risk of its actions being interpreted as reckless and dangerous. Israel would also need to transmit a message of being on the brink of action and set clear lines that Iran should not dare to cross. Any intelligence warnings of Iranian preparations to use the bomb would necessarily lead Israel to ready its strategic weapon. If Tehran did not retreat, this would lead to an Israeli attack.

Once Iran has gained long-term launching capabilities, containment of Iran would be easier. If Tehran were to pose a potential threat to important European countries and the United States, Western countries would no longer be able to sit aside and do nothing. Instead, Washington, London, and Paris would put their own nuclear arsenals on alert, which they would not hesitate to use if Tehran were to begin arming its own nuclear missiles. They would act without making any distinctions between missiles aimed at Israel and at their own territories.

American Willingness to Deter Iran and Its Impact on Israel

Israel's position regarding a nuclear Iran is dependent on how Jerusalem evaluates U.S. readiness and deterrence capability. There are several factors at play here: first, the overall degree of American support for Israel, which has been weaker under President Obama's administration; second, U.S. willingness to take political and strategic risks to provide Israel with the necessary security; and third, the global and regional leadership capacity of the United States in light of Washington's failure to prevent Iran from becoming nuclear, as well as the U.S. response to this crucial failure.¹³

The day after an Iranian bomb were to exist, Israel would find itself in an even more complicated international position. The United States, Israel's greatest and most powerful ally, would be revealed as an unreliable partner, unwilling or unable to protect Israel. Other Western countries would also note Washington's failure to impose order in the region. Israel's enemies may well conclude that the United States would no longer stand firmly by Israel's side and even that Washington had abandoned Israel in the face of its enemies.

One element Jerusalem could strive for in the face of a nuclear Iran would be additional U.S. military aid. This could include the transfer of F-22 jet fighters and advanced Tomahawk missiles¹⁴ or placing missile defense systems within Israeli territory.

AN ISRAELI PLAN B FOR A NUCLEAR IRAN: DANGERS & MITIGATING THE THREAT

Israeli strategy should respond to two key questions. First, what does Jerusalem seek to deter? Second, what is Jerusalem willing to do for this? In order to deter Iran from using the bomb, Jerusalem has to send Tehran sharp and clear messages. Israel should set clear limits for Iran and propose a hierarchy of expected responses dependent upon the risks posed by Tehran: first, and above all, an absolute prohibition of the use of Iran's nuclear power against Israel; second, and no less significant, a complete ban on transferring a nuclear device to terrorist organizations; and third, to stop using Hizballah and Hamas to cause indirect damage to Israel.

These red lines must be clear to Tehran on the day it acquires the bomb. Jerusalem should send a unified message to Tehran, Washington, and other Western and Arab/Muslim capitals. It should be transmitted directly and indirectly, overtly and covertly, making clear the price Iran would pay for any violation. Jerusalem's reaction would be aggressive. Israel would use all means, including its strategic arsenal, without restraint. Crossing the third red line would

also lead Jerusalem to respond decisively. In the case of an affront from Iran's agents and allies--Hizballah, Hamas and Syria--Jerusalem would react harshly in order to bring about Hizballah's demise; a fatal blow to Syria, including overthrow of the regime and the amputation of Assad's dynasty; or eliminating the Hamas government in Gaza.

In order for these messages to be truly effective, they should be emphasized to the ayatollahs long before Iran were to become nuclear, and even more forcibly after. Consequently, Jerusalem should anticipate this need and create communication channels with Tehran. Several players in the international community maintain ties with Iran. Switzerland, for example, has an active Embassy in Tehran, which could be used for transmitting messages. Initially, the messages would be unilateral, from Israel. However, Jerusalem should invest a considerable effort in developing direct lines of communication with Tehran in order to create a two-sided interaction between the capitals.

Jerusalem should be aware that both Tehran and other regional players would perceive the nuclearization of Iran as Israel's failure. Egypt and Turkey as well as Syria, Hizballah, and Hamas would focus on the colossal Israeli failure. Therefore, Israel must back its statements. If Teheran were to cross Israel's red lines, this should elicit an immediate Israeli response. If Israel commits itself to firm red lines, the level of the threat will rapidly fall, both from Tehran and the other actors in the region who attempt to challenge Israel.

Absolute Prohibition on Iran Using Nuclear Power Against Israel

An absolute prohibition on Iran on using its nuclear power against Israel would be challenging, but not impossible. Tehran must recognize the negative consequences of using nuclear weapons against Israel. In order to enforce this prohibition, Israel would have to reduce the risk of Iran using the bomb. This might include a guarantee to Tehran that Israel

would not launch a preemptive attack and would honor Iranian territorial integrity.

The prohibition should also include deterrence elements, such as the creation of a second- and third-strike capability as well as mutual defense agreements with Western powers. Such developments should take place in complete secrecy. More importantly, they must be presented to the ayatollahs slowly and carefully. Jerusalem would be required to maintain an element of surprise, while creating a real but gradual and growing sense that Israel had the complete ability to deal with the potential threat posed by Tehran.

Absolute Prohibition of Transferring Nuclear Devices to Terrorists

The danger of Tehran transferring a nuclear device to a terrorist organization still exists.¹⁵ While this would be difficult to prevent, the chance that the ayatollahs would indeed do so is slim. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has avoided crossing certain lines. Despite its strong support of Hizballah and Hamas, Tehran has refrained from equipping them with strategic weapons--whether chemical or biological--which apparently exist in its military arsenal.¹⁶ Despite the active support of movements acting against the U.S. presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, the mullahs have not supplied them with weapons that violate the status quo--such as missiles for attacking American aircrafts like those that the United States supplied the guerrillas fighting the Soviets during the Soviet-Afghan War.

The ayatollahs would probably not turn to this channel for fear they would be removed from power. Despite their extreme views, they know that such actions would elicit severe reactions from the United States and Israel. Washington has made it clear that any transfer of a nuclear device to terrorists would be perceived as a direct threat to U.S. national security and lead to a military response.

If Iran were to violate this, Israel would have two main options. The first option would be to mobilize the United States into action. In order to do this, Israel must act soon to expand and deepen its intelligence network within

Iran and along its borders. With this monitoring system in place, Jerusalem could provide Washington with evidence of Iranian attempts to transfer nuclear devices, or their actual implementation. The second option would be to threaten with a decisive response if Tehran were to provide nuclear weapons to terrorist groups in conflict with Israel. If Jerusalem relays to the Iranian regime a clear and firm message that would threaten its existence, it would be reasonable to conclude that a nuclear Iran would refrain from taking this route.

Ending the Use of Hizballah and Hamas to Cause Indirect Damage to Israel

Iranian nuclear weapons may encourage Tehran's agents in the region--Hizballah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza--to provoke Israel. Instead of acting with restraint, Israel should respond harshly to any attempt by such players to penetrate its territorial sovereignty, abduct soldiers, launch short/long-range missiles, or challenge its existence. Jerusalem should confront these players with its full conventional strength. Israel should also intercept all Iranian ammunition transfers to these organizations—whether sent directly or through Damascus—even at the cost of direct confrontation with Syria. What Jerusalem should make clear is that it would no longer practice restraint. It would act decisively to prevent the transfer of arms shipments to Hizballah and Hamas. Firm messages from Jerusalem backed by decisive military operations—but at the same time limited in scope--would lead Hizballah and Hamas leaders to desist from challenging Israel. Past lessons would lead them to conclude that they were alone in their confrontation with the conventional power of the IDF.

It is unlikely that Iranian leaders will act upon their declarations of solidarity and calls for unity with Hamas and Hizballah. Past experience indicates that the priority of the ayatollahs is the preservation of their power. While Iran openly challenges the United States and calls for the destruction of Israel, thus far, Tehran has not initiated any direct

military confrontation with either.¹⁷ Iran has frequently called for protecting the Palestinians and the Lebanese but refrained from supporting militarily in confrontations with Jerusalem. This was also the manner in which Iran behaved during the Second Lebanon War between Hizballah and Israel. Nor did Teheran interfere in Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in 2009, when the IDF struck back at Hamas.

Iran itself does not possess significant conventional capabilities. Its capacity to provide additional weapons systems to Hizballah and Hamas has been exhausted over the past few decades, during which Tehran has supplied them with the best military arsenal available. Its ability to transport military force threatening Israel's borders is limited and may be easily thwarted. These attempts could be blocked by the U.S. military forces, a large number of which would remain in the Gulf after the planned withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, it is unlikely that Iran's conventional capacity will grow in the foreseeable future. To the contrary, if Iran were to become nuclear, it would face a growing weapons embargo and severe sanctions on its already ailing economy. These measures would reduce Tehran's ability to constitute a real conventional threat on Israel.

Preventing Iran from Using the Bomb

A nuclear Iran may turn to the bomb for the wrong reasons, as a result of certain miscalculations or misperceptions of its leaders. Teheran could launch a nuclear attack due to false concerns of a preemptive Israeli attack, as a kind of revenge for past Israeli aggressions, or as a result of general feelings of deprivation in comparison to the advanced technology of the Western world. Israel and the international community should thus work together to prevent this danger.

As a new nuclear state, which holds a limited number of nuclear warheads but lacks a reliable second-strike capability, Iran would be very dangerous. Tehran may challenge Jerusalem the first chance it gets. Iran could strike first for fear of real or false plans to

attack it. Therefore, Tehran would need reliable guarantees that Israel and/or the United States did not intend to impose a strategic attack on it. This would ensure the safe crossing of the dangerous transition period until Iran were to achieve the second-strike capability, which is essential to maintaining stability between nuclear rivals.

Internal divisions between the various factions of the Iranian regime could also endanger the application of credible and effective central control over its strategic weapon systems. This could cause organizational failures and splits leading to an attack on Israel neither planned nor approved by the top leadership. In addition, Jerusalem should convey a clear message to Teheran that Israel would launch a strategic first-strike against it in any case of opening of launching shafts, mechanical transfer of ballistic missiles for their launch or fueling them, or sending Iranian jets or bombers into Israeli airspace.

Iran has been strongly opposed to allowing any external involvement in its internal affairs. This tendency was revealed to the West in the early 1950s, when Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadegh nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), an action that won the overwhelming sympathy of the Iranian masses, who flooded the streets.¹⁸ The founder of the Pahlavi Dynasty, Reza Shah, also acted in light of this tendency and was subsequently removed from power by Britain. His son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, echoed this and believed in Iran's need to stand on its own. However, understanding that this would ultimately lead to his own removal from the throne softened his opposition. Finally, the shah was forced to give up his seat for the same reason: the demand of the elites and masses to free Iran from the colonial forces that controlled the palace and the king.¹⁹

Reducing the fear of an Israeli attack against Tehran would reduce the danger of Iran initiating an initial nuclear attack. Israel should send Iran official covert messages through a trusted third party and, if possible, also directly. These should highlight Israeli respect for Iran's culture and its territorial integrity, and reassure Teheran that Jerusalem

does not intend to attack first without significant risk directed from Tehran.

At the same time, these messages should also sanctify Israeli territoriality. They should include an explicit threat of a massive strategic Israeli attack on Iran if Tehran were to target Israeli territory. Accordingly, Israel should convey the message that it would not hesitate to cause serious damage to those who were to challenge its existence. This process should be gradual. The messages should first be delivered by junior representatives. Later, the prime minister should explicitly present them as Israel's official policy.

If the ayatollahs feel their future might be endangered--whether a reasonable or false concern--this could lead them to take to extreme measures. In such a scenario, they may order the use of the bomb as a last resort, turning them into eternal Islamic saints. However, it is still possible to contain such an extreme act. Iranian leaders should be flooded with messages that such action would lead to the complete opposite result: Any Iranian nuclear attack on Israel would lead to a comprehensive Israeli retaliation.

Deterrence

Deterrence is the most essential element for containing Iran. Such deterrence, however, should be of a completely different kind than the U.S. strategy toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War.²⁰ The rational-Western/modern deterrence is based on mutual assured destruction (MAD), focusing on attacking power components, including nuclear weapons and their launching sites.

Rational deterrence is simple. Jerusalem should invest the necessary resources for developing a reliable second-strike capability. A total arsenal of six submarines carrying advanced launching platforms would adequately serve this strategic goal. The constant presence of two or three of them outside Israel's territorial waters would send a clear message regarding Jerusalem's ability to destroy Iran as a response to an initial Iranian nuclear strike.

Jerusalem should not completely rely on this solution, as it could fail; thus, it should develop additional elements. Based on models from South Korea and Japan, Jerusalem should use the interim period before Iran becomes nuclear to develop a third-strike capability--mutual defense agreements signed with the United States, Britain, and France. Accordingly, the ayatollahs would understand that any nuclear attack against Israel would automatically be considered an attack on Israeli's Western allies, which would have large-scale troops placed on Israeli soil in advance. This agreement would put Israel under the American nuclear umbrella.²¹ It would include a triple American-British-French commitment to launch a nuclear retaliation against Iran by using their strategic forces stationed outside of Israel as well. This would be regardless of Jerusalem's second-strike capability, which would survive after an Iranian nuclear assault.

Coping with Additional Threats of a Nuclear Iran

The integration of intent with practical ability could be catastrophic to Israel. Accordingly, Israel should send Tehran a sharp message that it will no longer accept such behavior on the part of Ahmadinejad and his fellow leaders. The message should first be sent indirectly. This may not initially have an effect, thus highlighting the presence of Israeli submarines off the coast of Bandar-e Abbas may be a more practical response.

Second, Iran may sell nuclear know-how, which could find its way to Israel's enemies. As Pakistan and North Korea's advanced nuclear programs have been available for over a decade on the nuclear black market, it unlikely Iran becoming nuclear would worsen the situation. Nevertheless, credible threats from the international community have led the United States to impose strong sanctions on Iran, and Tehran's fear of an Israeli and/or American strategic first-strike would deter Tehran from pursuing this route.

Third, the plan to reduce U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan could move Iran to challenge

its neighbors in the region. It could persuade the Gulf States to jump on the Iranian bandwagon. This is more of a risk for the smaller Gulf States, Bahrain and Kuwait, where there is a large Shi'i population, and less so for Saudi Arabia.

The United States is a trusted source of security for Saudi Arabia. Riyadh relies on Washington and recognizes the fact that the Saudi royal existence depends on petrodollars and the White House's commitment to the al-Saud dynasty. Iran is a strategic and ideological rival to Riyadh. Tehran also lacks the economic and military capabilities of the United States. Thus, it is not likely that Riyadh will join its eastern Shi'i rival and forgo the continuous and reliable security provided by the United States. It is more reasonable to conclude that the Saudis would strengthen their relations with Washington, call for the United States to expand its presence in the Gulf, and ask for its nuclear protection.

If well-prepared for the new emerging reality, Jerusalem would be able to reap the benefits of Iran's nuclear buildup in the region. Numerous Gulf States, first and foremost Saudi Arabia, may actually strengthen their ties with Washington, and through this with Israel as well.²²

Fourth, Israel may find a nuclear Iran to be only the beginning of a much larger confrontation. Other countries in the region, such as Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, may purchase the bomb.²³ Israel should engage the United States to prevent regional proliferation, while cleverly using the last decade of American promises of preventing Iran from becoming nuclear.

Past experience shows that countries in the region will not automatically develop the bomb, despite their well-founded fear that Israel has a nuclear arsenal. There is no reason for Jerusalem not to preserve the status quo, given its proper strategic conduct and skilled use of the strong lever it has in Washington. Israel should conduct a comprehensive campaign to encourage the White House and the two houses of Congress to take action: Egypt depends on annual U.S. support of a \$1.5 billion of advanced military equipment

supply; Turkey depends on Washington's support for joining the EU and maintaining its position within NATO. Ankara also needs the White House to reject the U.S. Congressional law recognizing the Armenian genocide; and Riyadh depends on Washington promising the flow of petrodollars, ensuring the security of the kingdom, and protecting the perpetuation of the al-Saud dynasty.²⁴

CONCLUSION

As goes the old Persian proverb, "When it is dark enough, you can see the stars." If Iran were to acquire the bomb, such a scenario could also open the door to new opportunities. Jerusalem could improve its relations with Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. With Washington's help, a historic defense alliance could be created among the four as a counterweight to an Iranian nuclear threat.

Acquiring the bomb would necessarily lead to Iran's absolute military strengthening and could lead Tehran to act against Israel. However, there is no reason to assume that Iran would use its nuclear weapons immediately.²⁵ It would be more reasonable to assume that the regime would instead direct its efforts toward producing a large nuclear arsenal and a reliable second-strike capability. During this period, Tehran would discover that its membership in the exclusive nuclear club would not be without its obligations and limitations.

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NOTES

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