

Speaking about the Unspeakable

U.S.-Israeli Dialogue on
Iran's Nuclear Program

Chuck Freilich



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AGENDA: IRAN

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Executive Summary

THE UNITED STATES and Israel have long shared a truly “special relationship” whose breadth and depth are almost unprecedented. Moreover, as U.S. interests in the region have expanded in recent years, the classic relationship, based on U.S. support for Israel’s diplomatic, security, and economic needs, has given way to one based on a broader array of shared threats and interests in the areas of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), terrorism, fundamentalism, and more. Iran’s nuclear program, in particular, which both countries have defined as “unacceptable” and expressed their resolve to prevent, has been the focus of an extensive exchange of intelligence and diplomatic information.

Nevertheless, a bilateral exchange does not appear to have taken place on the two paramount issues related to the Iranian nuclear threat: the possibility of military action, if the diplomatic route runs its course, and, conversely, possible means of “living with” a nuclear Iran, should both the United States and Israel decide to refrain from military action. This study argues that significant obstacles may indeed exist to a substantive and comprehensive dialogue on such issues, seeks to explain why, and proposes possible means of surmounting the difficulties. Following are some of the possible obstacles to open dialogue presented in the study.

Israel might fear that the very act of raising the issue of military action would risk an American “veto” and may thus seek to refrain from placing itself in such a situation, much as it did in 1981, when it did not consult with the United States before attacking Iraq’s Osiraq reactor. Moreover, the United States might welcome knowledge of an Israeli intention to strike as removing the impetus for American action. Given the clearly greater American capability to conduct a successful operation, Israel would prefer that the United States be the one to carry it out and would thus again be reluctant to discuss its own plans. Conversely, if Israel does not have an effective military option, in all likelihood, it would be no less reluctant to divulge this—again for fear that the pressure on the United States to carry

out the strike would decrease. Therefore, in both cases, Israel may be hesitant to discuss its military options with the United States.

The United States, for its part, may be similarly averse to discuss military options with Israel, although no doubt exists that the United States has the operational capacity to conduct a major airstrike against Iran. Were the United States to veto an Israeli operation in the face of an existential threat, Israel would expect satisfactory assurance of U.S. intentions. The United States, however, would presumably wish to keep its options open and refrain from making far-reaching commitments. The United States may also fear that Israel might interpret U.S. willingness to discuss military options as *de facto* legitimization, or approval, for action. Moreover, if the United States decides not to act militarily, it might be reluctant to apprise Israel, for fear that the U.S. decision would be seen as justification for an independent Israeli strike.

Similarly, Israel would be hesitant to engage in a discussion of the options for “living with” a nuclear Iran out of fear that the United States might interpret this discussion as a signal of Israel’s willingness to countenance the possibility, forgo military options, and consider means of containing and deterring the threat rather than eliminating it. The United States may be no less reluctant than Israel to raise the subject, out of concern that Israel would view this discussion as an indication that the United States is not truly committed to preventing a nuclear Iran and thus as a justification for an independent strike.

Clearly, Israel’s understanding of American strategy, especially of the likelihood of U.S. military action, would affect Israel’s determination to act unilaterally. Were Israel confident of U.S. military action, it would no doubt be willing to hold its own fire. Similarly, Israel’s willingness to discuss options for living with a nuclear Iran would be affected by a better appreciation of American strategy and of the deterrent options the United States would be willing to consider. In the absence of dialogue, Israel may be driven to avoidable

measures or ones of lesser efficacy than those at the disposal of the United States. The United States, for its part, may miss opportunities to deal with the issue in the manner it deems most effective, or preferable, and may be left to deal with the consequences of actions to which it was not a party.

To the extent that the analysis presented in this study accurately reflects reality, serious obstacles exist to a true bilateral U.S.-Israeli dialogue on what is arguably the most important issue they have ever faced together. By the time the two countries overcome these obstacles, it may be too late to realize fully

the benefits of joint consultation, both in terms of the means of preventing Iran from achieving nuclear capability and of adopting joint measures for living with it.

One thing is abundantly clear: if ever a test case existed of the strength of the U.S.-Israeli relationship, the Iranian nuclear program is it. On particularly sensitive issues, however, sovereign nations are loath to discuss openly their intentions and capabilities even with their closest allies. This reluctance is particularly true in cases of asymmetric relations, where one side is far more dependent than the other.

Introduction

Fast forward, Lebanon, summer 2010. After four years of tenuous quiet, a rearmed Hizballah, acting at Iran's behest, again launches rockets into Israel. Israel, determined to deal Hizballah a truly severe blow, counterattacks, successfully applying the lessons of the 2006 war. Syria, greatly strengthened by its growing military alliance with Iran, concentrates its forces. Iran, having thwarted all diplomatic attempts to curtail its nuclear program, announces that it has "the bomb," hinting at Israel's destruction. The United States places its forces on alert. The UN Security Council convenes an emergency session. Oil prices go off the charts....

FOR WELL OVER A DECADE, the United States and Israel have engaged in an extensive exchange of information and assessments on Iran's nuclear program, often coordinating their ongoing, day-to-day diplomatic activities and even taking some joint military steps, such as U.S. financing for development of Israel's Arrow antimissile system. Both have defined an Iranian nuclear capability as being "unacceptable" and have expressed their determination to use all of the means at their disposal to prevent its fruition.¹

If Israel's early assessments of the timeline for the development of the Iranian nuclear program have proven in retrospect to have been overly pessimistic, no doubt exists that Israel was the first to fully identify and understand the emerging threat and to put the United States and the world community on notice. Today, the two countries' assessments are converging—more pro-

tracted than Israel's long-feared worst-case scenario, sooner than Washington's estimate. If U.S. and Israeli assessments of the timeline to an operational Iranian capability have ranged recently from three to eight years,² with Israel tending toward the former, new disclosures regarding Iran's centrifuge program lend greater credence to the lower end.³

The publicly available information on the policy side of the U.S.-Israeli dialogue on the Iranian nuclear program—in other words, those measures they could adopt to impede and prevent the program's completion or to live with it once operational—is limited. Indeed, beyond the diplomatic and sanctions approach under discussion in the UN Security Council, as well as possible multilateral sanctions outside of the UN system, the impression to be gained is that very little dialogue has taken place on how actually to deal with the Iranian nuclear threat should these measures fail.⁴

The absence of publicly available evidence, of course, does not mean that a quiet, policy-oriented dialogue has not taken place. For obvious reasons, both sides are trying to keep a tight lid on their exchanges.

Sovereign nations, however—including allies, even those with as close a relationship as the United States and Israel—are most often loath to fully divulge their intentions to each other, for a variety of reasons. One has only to read Winston Churchill's memoirs to grasp his frustration over what he perceived to be limited American willingness to engage in a fully candid exchange with Britain during World War II. Similarly,

1. See for example, "President Bush Calls a Nuclear Iran 'Unacceptable,'" Voice of America, March 1, 2005; Jeffrey Smith, "Bush Confounded by the 'Unacceptable,'" *Washington Post*, October 13, 2006; Vice President Cheney, "We Will Not Allow Iran to Have Nuclear Weapons," in Steven R. Weisman, "Cheney Warns of 'Consequences' for Iran on Nuclear Issue," *New York Times*, March 8, 2006; Prime Minister Sharon, "(Israel) Can Not Accept a Nuclear Iran," in Sheera Claire Frenkel, "Ze'evi on Iran: Israel Must Be Prepared to Act if Diplomacy Fails by March," *Jerusalem Post*, December 1, 2005, p. 1.
2. E. Kam, "A Nuclear Iran: What Does It Mean, and What Can Be Done," *Memorandum 88* (Institute for National Strategic Studies [INSS], Tel Aviv, 2007), p. 85; Steven Erlanger, "Israel Wants West to Deal More Urgently with Iran," *New York Times*, January 13, 2006; Aluf Benn, "Four Reasons for Ranting," *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), December 28, 2006; D. Albright and C. Hinderstein, *The Clock Is Ticking, But How Fast?* Institute for Science and International Security, March 27, 2006 (available online at www.isis-online.org/publications/iran/clockticking.pdf); Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Secretary's Response to Questions Following Shangri-La Security Conference Remarks, June 2, 2007 (available online at www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=3975).
3. Amos Harel, "AMAN: An Iranian Nuclear Capability by Mid 2009," *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), July 11, 2007; E. Asculai, "Iran's Nuclear Weapons Program: Has the Time-Line Changed?" *INSS Insight* 17, May 17, 2007. According to Anthony Cordesman, Israel believes Iran may have a nuclear option by 2009; the United States pegs the date after 2010 ("Israeli and U.S. Strikes on Iran: A Speculative Analysis," working draft, Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 5, 2007).
4. See, for example, "Ya'alon's Sensible 'Gaffe,'" *Jerusalem Post*, March 13, 2006.

a senior British official once described the U.S.-British dialogue preceding the 2003 invasion of Iraq as akin to “an ant riding near the anus of a rhinoceros.”⁵ If this description is true of the U.S.-British relationship, the U.S.-Israeli dialogue on the Iranian nuclear program may likewise suffer from various obstacles to fully frank and open discussion.

For the purposes of this study, the working assumption is that the United States and Israel

have not yet fully explored the policy options available if the diplomatic and sanctions approach fails, an eventuality that may materialize in a matter of months. The study is thus speculative in nature and seeks to identify the issues they *should* be talking about, the potential obstacles to this dialogue, and the means of minimizing them to ensure optimal bilateral dialogue and policy formulation on this vital challenge.

5. Private communication to author.

The Iranian Threat: A Shared U.S. and Israeli Assessment?

THE UNITED STATES and Israel share a common assessment of Iran's pernicious role as a regional and international player. Its active promotion of terror (Hamas, Hizballah, al-Qaeda, the insurgents in Iraq) is a source of great common concern, in its own right and as a means of disrupting both the Middle East peace process and the process of reconstruction and reconciliation in Iraq. Both countries view Iran's rising hegemony in the region as well as its role in empowering and leading the radical elements of the Muslim world as a threat.

The United States and Israel fear Iran's emergence as a primary actor in Iraq, not only as a major threat to the future character of Iraq but also because of the danger Iran poses in this capacity to various neighboring states, such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan, and to regional stability. An Iranian-dominated Iraq could pose a threat to the longevity of the Hashemite Kingdom in Jordan—an American and Israeli ally; bring Iran even closer to Israel's border; and in the event of the kingdom's future demise, bring Iran right up to it.

The specter of a nuclear Iran is, of course, the primary source of shared apprehension. Although Iran's other WMD programs and its growing ballistic missile inventory concern the United States and Israel, the nuclear program, undoubtedly the most dangerous, has eclipsed all other issues in recent years and constitutes their primary focus.

In more concrete terms, the United States and Israel view the Iranian nuclear threat as encompassing the following elements:

- Possible Iranian *use* of nuclear weapons, even if most analysts believe that such a likelihood may be low.
- A possible Iranian *threat* to use nuclear weapons, whether explicit or implied, with severe ramifications

for both the U.S. and Israeli strategic calculus and freedom of maneuver. The threat could be made in a direct confrontation with the United States, Israel, or both, or as a means of bolstering regional allies, such as Syria, Hizballah, and al-Qaeda, and of dictating outcomes favorable to them.

- Possible proliferation of nuclear technology, equipment, materials, and weapons to radical states or terrorist organizations, with or without the knowledge of the Iranian government.¹
- The basis for a more aggressive Iranian foreign and defense policy and a greater capacity to influence (or coerce) regional players.
- A catalyst for a regional nuclear arms race. Nearly a dozen countries (including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan, Turkey, and Algeria) have already responded to Iran's nuclear quest with a growing interest in "civil" nuclear programs of their own.
- The danger of an Iranian nuclear capability falling into the hands of an even more extremist regime, if the current one is replaced, or of a loss of control over it in a scenario of internal chaos.
- A severe blow to international nonproliferation norms and regimes, foremost the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT),² with global consequences.

In the past, the United States rejected the Israeli position, which defined the "point of no return" for preventive action, military and most likely diplomatic, as the stage at which Iran attained the technological know-how needed to produce highly enriched uranium.³ Israel believed that once Iran had mastered the

1. M. Fitzpatrick, "Assessing Iran's Nuclear Programme," *Survival* 48, no. 3 (Autumn 2006), pp. 20–21.

2. E. Kam, "A Nuclear Iran: What Does It Mean, and What Can be Done," *Memorandum* 88 (INSS, Tel Aviv, 2007), pp. 54–60.

3. Fitzpatrick, "Assessing Iran's Nuclear Programme," p. 25.

technology, achieving an operational capability would be only a matter of time. The United States, in contrast, maintained that a period of a few years might still separate the technological threshold from a first operational capability, thereby providing additional time to deal with the threat.

Today, significant bilateral disagreement is hard to imagine on a modified version of the deadline for preventive military action: when Iran actually produces sufficient fissile material to build its first bomb (or gains it from a third party), rather than when it has a weaponized capability, which might take another year or longer. Indeed, when Iran has sufficient fissile material, it can easily disperse the minute quantities needed to a number of sites, making its elimination a virtual operational impossibility.⁴

In their public pronouncements, both the United States and Israel go out of their way to stress the close identity of views they share regarding Iran's regional role and the threat it poses.⁵ Their perceptions, however, evidence a fundamental asymmetry.

For Israel, Iran presents a potentially existential threat.⁶ For the first time since the 1948 War of Independence, an avowed adversary will have the actual capability to threaten Israel's very survival. As such, Israel sees the Iranian nuclear program as a threat to be prevented at virtually all costs, or at least severe ones, outweighing all other considerations. Clearly, Israel would not want to see a potential resolution of the nuclear issue that does not address Iran's other WMD and missile programs, support for terror, and opposition to the peace process. Nevertheless, Israel attaches such overwhelming importance to the nuclear threat that it might be willing to settle for a solution limited solely to this issue, at the expense of its other interests, taking a "we will cross that bridge when we get there" approach.

For the United States, in contrast, the nuclear issue is one of a number of issues of major concern regard-

ing Iran, albeit the paramount one along with Iran's role in Iraq. From the U.S. perspective, the Iranian issue is primarily a threat to the security of its allies, including both Israel and friendly Arab regimes; to American forces in the region; to the American effort in Iraq; and to the Middle East's vast energy resources. In a broader sense, the United States is also concerned about Iran's long-range missile capabilities, which could bring America's European allies into range, as well as the danger of transfers (authorized or otherwise) of nuclear technology, or even materials and weapons, to terrorist groups. Should Iran eventually develop ICBMs capable of reaching the United States itself, it would then become a direct threat.

Thus, Iran poses a severe threat to American national security interests and constitutes an important matter of global counterterrorism and nonproliferation policy. For the United States, however, an Iranian nuclear capability will by no means constitute an existential threat.

This fundamental asymmetry colors the U.S. and Israeli perceptions of the Iranian threat and of the timing and means of addressing it. Whereas Israel believes that the threat must be *eliminated*, or at least significantly delayed, by all means possible—diplomatic if feasible, military if necessary⁷—other options more readily present themselves for the United States, such as deterrence and containment. Were it not for the threat to Israel and the possibility of a preventive Israeli strike, options such as these might have greater resonance for U.S. policymakers.

Moreover, for both strategic and domestic political reasons, a potential deal with Iran, from an American perspective, would probably have to encompass a variety of issues, not just the nuclear one. First among these would be curbs on Iran's role in Iraq; its active opposition to the peace process; support for terrorist organi-

4. Kam, "A Nuclear Iran," pp. 33, 69.

5. See, for example, *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), May 24, 2005.

6. M. Fitzpatrick, "Can Iran's Nuclear Capability Be Kept Latent?" *Survival* 49, no. 1 (March 2007), pp. 33–58; J. Fitchett, "Israeli Reaction to Iran's Buildup Is Heightening Nuclear Fears in Mideast," *International Herald Tribune*, December 19, 1997 (available online at www.iht.com/articles/1997/12/19/diplo_t_1.php).

7. Fitchett, "Israeli Reaction to Iran's Buildup Is Heightening Nuclear Fears in Mideast."

zations such as al-Qaeda, Hizballah, and Hamas; alliance with Syria; other WMD and missile programs; and human rights violations.

The two countries' criteria for a "successful" resolution of the nuclear issue, their "red lines" for diplomacy and effective deadlines for preventive military action, thus differ.⁸ For Israel, the latter would constitute a final opportunity to eliminate the Iranian threat without exposing itself to a potentially devastating response. The United States, in contrast, with a longer timeline, can more readily fall back on deterrence and containment. If these differences were to result in a prolongation of U.S. efforts to achieve a breakthrough on the nuclear issue, Israel would be put in a diffi-

cult position—balancing allegiance to its superpower patron against its existential fear of the Iranian nuclear program.

Both the United States and Israel would clearly prefer a resolution of the issue that provides for complete cessation of all nuclear activity in Iran, at least of fuel cycle-related activity, though what precisely this means is a complex technical issue that they would have to work out. Over the years, however, they have come to realize that Iran cannot be prevented from having a domestic nuclear power-generating capability, and they have resigned themselves to the ultimate completion of the Bushehr reactor and presumably of future power reactors as well.

8. Kam, "A Nuclear Iran," pp. 33, 69.

The Bilateral Dialogue to Date

THE UNITED STATES and Israel have conducted an extensive ongoing dialogue on the Iranian nuclear program ever since the early 1990s, both on the political and intelligence levels. From Yitzhak Rabin to Ehud Olmert, the Iranian nuclear threat has been one of the primary issues on the agenda of almost every prime ministerial visit to Washington. The same has been true of most meetings between the ministers of foreign affairs and defense and their American counterparts, as well as of countless meetings between officials at all levels of the respective national security establishments.¹ With the exception of the Palestinian issue, no other topic is likely to have been the focus of such intensive bilateral attention.

The intelligence exchange has been particularly extensive. In recent years, Mossad director Meir Dagan, appointed by Ariel Sharon to head an inter-agency team dealing with the Iranian issue, has become a regular visitor in Washington, meeting with his CIA counterparts, the National Intelligence Director, and senior officials from the Pentagon, National Security Council (NSC), and other agencies.² Officials from Israeli military intelligence, from its chief down, also meet regularly with their U.S. counterparts, and the heads of the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission have been recurrent visitors.³

The Iranian nuclear issue has been discussed extensively in various joint strategic forums, including the

Joint Politico-Military Group (JPMG), composed of representatives from the respective diplomatic, military, intelligence, and foreign affairs establishments. The JPMG is arguably the most important of the bilateral strategic forums and certainly the longest standing, and the Iranian issue has long been central to its meetings. The recent decision to increase the frequency of JPMG meetings from a semiannual to a quarterly basis⁴ may be an indication of the two sides' growing sense of concern regarding Iran as well as their desire to keep better informed regarding each other's thinking.

In the early 2000s, Under Secretary of State John Bolton, on the American side, and the head of the NSC and subsequently the director general of the Foreign Ministry, on the Israeli side, headed a senior bilateral, interagency forum on Iran. During his visits, Bolton also met regularly with the prime minister, the foreign minister, and the head of the Israeli Atomic Energy Commission.⁵ In recent years, the Iranian issue has been discussed in the "Strategic Dialogue," a semi-annual forum headed by the undersecretary of state for political affairs on the American side and by the minister for strategic dialogues on the Israeli side.⁶

From the publicly available information, this array of meetings, joint consultations, and strategic forums has clearly seen a broad exchange of information and assessments, as well as ongoing discussion of steps to be taken in the immediate future (e.g., regarding impend-

1. "Ya'alon's Sensible 'Gaffe,'" *Jerusalem Post*, March 13, 2006; "Israel Alerted U.S. to Iran's Nuclear Ambition," *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 17, 1995; Israel TV Channel Two, April 4, 1999; Israel TV, April 25, 2006; "Israel Emphasizes Iranian Threat; On U.S. Visit, Sharon Expected to Warn of Weapons Activity," *Washington Post*, February 7, 2002; *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), February 19, 2001; Marius Schattner, "Israel Downplays Differences with US after Summit," Agence France-Presse, April 13, 2005; *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), May 1, 2006; Press Conference Rabin-Clinton, November 12, 1993, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Press Conference Clinton-Netanyahu, February 13, 1997, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs; "Israeli Media Suggest US Move on Iran 'Tactical,'" BBC Monitoring Middle East—Political, June 1, 2006.
2. "Israeli Mossad Chief to Discuss Terrorism, Iranian Nukes in USA Visit," BBC Monitoring, April 25, 2006; Uzi Mahnaimi, Marie Colvin, and Sarah Baxter, "Iran's Psychopath in Chief, by Israel," *Sunday Times* (London), April 30, 2006; *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), June 1, 2006.
3. *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), May 2006; Seymour Hersh, "The Iran Game; How Will Tehran's Nuclear Ambitions Affect Our Budding Partnership?" *The New Yorker*, December 3, 2001; Federal News Service, May 24, 2007; "U.S.-Israel Strategic Dialogue," Office of the Spokesman, U.S. State Department, June 7, 2007.
4. Carol Migdalovitz, *Israel: Background and Relations with the United States*, Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, June 14, 2006; "Israel-US Talks on Iran Policy Possibly to Include Syria Issue—TV," BBC Monitoring International Reports, May 28, 2007; *Defense News*, January 16, 2006.
5. "U.S., Israeli Officials Confer over Iranian Nuclear Program," *Nucleonics Week*, April 22, 2004; Janine Zacharia, "US Arms Expert Here over Iranian Nuke Threat," *Jerusalem Post*, June 8, 2003.
6. State Department Press Statement, November 29, 2005; Shmuel Rosner, *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), November 29, 2005; *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), November 22, 2006; Aluf Benn, "Strategic Talks with US Forces on Iranian Threat," *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), January 22, 2007; "U.S.-Israel Strategic Dialogue," June 7, 2007.

ing developments in the UN Security Council or International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA]).⁷ What is unknown is whether these contacts have gone beyond this exchange to include a policy-oriented dialogue on the two sides' intentions, strategies, and capabilities. The public record shows no indication of a bilateral discussion of the military options or of the means of coping with Iran, should it actually achieve a nuclear capability. Indeed, both sides have been careful to stress in their public pronouncements that although they have not ruled out any options, including military ones, they are focused at this point solely on diplomacy.⁸

In addition to these exchanges, the two sides have taken a number of joint practical steps to increase Isra-

el's security in the face of the Iranian threat. These steps include U.S. sales to Israel of long-range F-15s, "bunker busters,"⁹ and other arms, as well as U.S. financial support for Israel's antimissile Arrow system.

In September 2007, the media was rife with reports of a purported Israeli airstrike against a North Korean-supplied nuclear facility in Syria. The United States and Israel reportedly exchanged intelligence regarding the facility in the months preceding the raid and coordinated positions afterward.¹⁰ Although details of the raid remain unknown at the time of this writing, it serves to underscore the need for close, discrete, high-level, and intense bilateral consultations on issues pertaining to the prevention of WMD proliferation.

7. "U.S.-Israel Strategic Dialogue," June 7, 2007.

8. "Ya'alon's Sensible 'Gaffe'"; Schattner, "Israel Downplays Differences with US after Summit"; Meeting between Minister Mofaz and Secretary Rice, Federal News Service, May 24, 2007; Israel Army Radio, 10:10, February 7, 2005.

9. "US Unveils Plans to Sell 'Bunker Busters' to Israel," Agence France-Presse, April 28, 2005.

10. See, for example, Glenn Kessler and Robin Wright, "Israel, U.S. Shared Data on Suspected Nuclear Site; Bush Was Told of North Korean Presence in Syria, Sources Say," *Washington Post*, September 21, 2007.

The Bilateral Dialogue: Strategic Options

IN BROAD TERMS, three primary options exist for preventing the emergence of an Iranian nuclear threat.

Preventive Option 1: Diplomacy and Sanctions

At present, the increasing international pressure of the past few years, including two mild resolutions in the UN Security Council, clearly have failed to engender the desired change in Iranian policy. Iran remains defiant under its radical president; indeed, Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad seems to welcome gratuitous tension with the international community.

At the same time, recent developments have indicated that Iran is not impervious to international pressure. A proud nation with an ancient culture and a sense of its own unique place on the international stage, more than somewhat chagrined that a 231-year-old “upstart” presumes to tell it what to do, Iran views itself as a highly legitimate player on the international scene. Therefore, it does not want to find itself the focus of severe international opprobrium or to become an international pariah. Even the limited steps taken by the Security Council to date appear to have generated something of an internal debate in Iran. Admittedly, this debate has not been about the necessity of the nuclear program itself, but rather over the price Iran has begun paying for its needlessly confrontational behavior and the prospects that it may soon face harsher international measures.

Nevertheless, this initial response provides some practical basis for the shared U.S. and Israeli hope that the sanctions route may still lead to the desired change in Iranian policy, if “ratcheted up” sufficiently. An appropriate U.S.-Israeli dialogue would thus seek to fully explore the range of effective diplomatic and eco-

nomics sanctions that can be brought to bear against Iran and to assess the prospects for mustering sufficient international support for them—whether in, or outside of, the Security Council.¹ Iranian rhetoric notwithstanding, Iran is highly vulnerable to diplomatic and economic sanctions (see appendix).

The sanctions route has various advantages and disadvantages, which the United States and Israel would have to address. Clearly, both sides would greatly prefer a diplomatic resolution of the issue, but neither appears to have much faith in its ultimate success.² Indeed, despite Iran’s considerable vulnerability to sanctions, it is highly questionable whether any combination of international sanctions, or positive inducements for that matter, could truly elicit the desired change in Iran’s policies. For strategic reasons predating the Islamic regime, Iran has important national security considerations that make the pursuit of nuclear weapons an understandable, if nevertheless unacceptable, policy.

For the United States, fully playing out the sanctions course—even if its failure is perceived to be all but preordained—may be a political necessity before quasi-military options (e.g., naval blockade), let alone a direct military attack, become politically feasible. Following the Iraqi WMD debacle, the United States will be constrained to demonstrate both to domestic public opinion and to the international community that this time it truly has exhausted all nonmilitary measures.³ During this stage, the United States will seek assurance that Israel will maintain a relatively low profile on Iran and try to keep a lid on the Palestinian and other issues, so as not to divert attention from the nuclear threat and lead to its embroilment in the already noxious Arab-Israeli confrontation. Moreover, the United States may view

1. The public record indicates that a dialogue of this nature is indeed taking place. See Federal News Service, May 24, 2007, Defense Minister Mofaz, following meeting with Secretary Rice; Israel Army Radio, 10:10, February 7, 2005.
2. L. Hadar, “Osirak Redux?” *The American Conservative*, January 15, 2007; U. Evtental, “The United States and the Iranian Nuclear Challenge: Inadequate Alternatives, Problematic Choices,” *Strategic Assessment* 9, no. 1 (April 2006).
3. P. Clawson and M. Eisenstadt, *Forcing Hard Choices on Tehran: Raising the Costs of Iran’s Nuclear Program*, Policy Focus no. 62 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 2006), p. 27. Available online (www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=257)

progress in the peace process as a means of facilitating its efforts to mobilize international pressure against Iran.

Israel understands U.S. constraints in this matter and will certainly not wish to be seen as pushing it into taking precipitate measures. Israel's approach, however, would be colored by its greater stakes in the issue and shorter timeline. Although it will wish to see the non-military options applied to the fullest, it would fear an open-ended process whose very appeal for all sides could, in practice, provide cover for completion of Iran's developmental efforts. Israel is thus likely to seek to engage the United States on the criteria for determining the success or failure of the sanctions effort and the critical point at which the United States would conclude that the time has arrived for quasi-military or military measures. The United States will presumably be hesitant to define such clear criteria.

Israel will have a role of little if any consequence during this sanctions stage. Nevertheless, Washington's ability to point to the "Israeli (military) option" will continue to buttress its negotiating leverage with potential sanctions partners (whether a preventive Israeli strike before Iran reaches an operational nuclear capability or what some U.S. allies might perceive as the doomsday scenario of a preemptive Israeli attack after nuclear capability is achieved).⁴

The imposition of increasingly stringent sanctions will presumably elicit an Iranian response, for which both the United States and Israel will have to prepare. Iran will presumably seek to divert attention from itself to other issues, such as the Israeli-Palestinian or Israeli-Hizballah arenas, the "double standard" regarding Israel's purported nuclear capabilities, and Iraq. Iran is also likely to undertake intensive diplomatic activity in various nuclear forums, for example, the IAEA and UN Disarmament Commission. Iran would further seek to break the sanctions regime by importing and exporting goods through friendly neighboring states, such as Syria. These and other possible responses will require close U.S.-Israeli consultation on the desired counter-measures they wish to adopt.

A major issue regarding the diplomatic route is whether the U.S. effort to apply increasingly stringent international sanctions against Iran should be accompanied by a concomitant attempt to promote a bilateral dialogue with that country. For the Bush administration, dialogue with "axis of evil" states (Iran, North Korea) and similar rogues, such as Syria, has been virtual anathema, but in recent months, it has proven to be an increasingly practical, if distasteful, necessity. Clearly, international support for severe sanctions will be easier to harness if the United States is perceived as having explored all options for negotiations with Iran first.

In the past, Israel appears to have feared that a U.S.-Iranian dialogue might be the start of a "slippery slope" that would harm its interests. Today, however, although its instinctual response might be one of alarm, a more sober analysis might lead Israel to endorse such an effort fully, not out of belief in its efficacy but as an essential way station on the route to quasi-military and military measures. Indeed, given the overwhelming importance Israel attaches to the nuclear program, it might actually welcome a U.S.-Iranian dialogue and accede to virtually any agreement that put an end to the nuclear threat, even at the expense of its other concerns regarding Iran. To this end, Israel would presumably support providing the Iranians with a broad set of incentives, whether directly related to the nuclear issue, such as U.S. security guarantees for Iran, or indirectly related, such as a U.S. commitment to forgo regime change and end sanctions.

If the Iranians were to pose unrelated demands, for example, regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (such as unilateral withdrawal or admission of refugees), or conversely, demand that Israel dismantle its own strategic capabilities, this response would of course raise different considerations. Short of such extreme demands, however, the basic Israeli approach would probably be completely pragmatic: simply to bring about an acceptable nuclear agreement with Iran and leave all else for the future. Its only demand would likely be that Iran agrees to suspend all enrich-

4. G. Allison, "How to Respond to the Challenge from Iran" (Soref Conference, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., May 12, 2006). Available online (www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC07.php?CID=294).

ment activity for the duration of the dialogue, a position shared by the United States.

Preventive Option 2: Quasi-Military Options

A further ratcheting up of the pressure on Iran, short of an actual military attack, might take the form of a naval blockade, whether comprehensive or partial (e.g., one limited to Iranian imports of refined petroleum). A partial air and ground blockade might also be feasible. Tehran would view a blockade as a major escalation that can be expected to elicit a strong response. In any event, the United States and Israel must jointly explore these and other quasi-military options, such as shows of force, and prepare for the possible Iranian responses. Although Israel would have no role in a naval blockade, it might have a role in other quasi-military options.

Preventive Option 3: The Military Option

The truly critical stage in the bilateral dialogue on the Iranian nuclear program will arrive when the United States, Israel, or both conclude that they have exhausted all diplomatic sanctions and quasi-military options. Achieving a joint definition of this turning point may very well prove difficult. Nevertheless, the United States and Israel may, in the not distant future, confront the reality of a soon-to-be-nuclear Iran and the need to make a fateful choice between military action or options for “living with” a nuclear Iran.⁵

The military options include a strictly American or Israeli operation, a joint or coordinated one, one conducted by the United States and one or more allies, a NATO operation, or one sanctioned by the UN Security Council. In the multilateral cases, the United States would presumably bear the primary military burden but enjoy a broader diplomatic umbrella and possibly some military assistance.

In reality, the first two options appear more likely. The United States does not need either Israeli or NATO capabilities to conduct the strike. The dangers of operational leaks would grow, and Israeli participation in a U.S.-led strike would have consequences for American relations with the Arab/Muslim world. The involvement of various allies, NATO, or the Security Council would be highly desirable in terms of the U.S. interest in presenting the Iranian threat as a broad international challenge rather than a narrow American or Israeli one, as well as for the diplomatic “cover” such involvement would accord. These options are thus worthy of consideration, though both NATO and Security Council approval are most unlikely and their pursuit may simply serve to delay a U.S. operation beyond the operational deadline. Given the demands of the U.S. military commitment in Iraq, its interest in NATO involvement might grow if it was considered necessary to conduct an operation that went beyond mere airstrikes and special forces: that is, one that required significant ground forces.

The shared operational objective of a military strike would be, at a bare minimum, to set the Iranian program back by a few years and to convince Iran that attempts to reconstitute it would result in renewed attacks and thus prove futile.⁶ Preventing the program’s reconstitution would require both the capability and determination to conduct repeated attacks over the course of years and to withstand the ensuing military and political backlash.⁷ A major question in this regard is whether a military strike would encourage Iran to forgo its nuclear efforts or, to the contrary, lead to their reinforcement and acceleration, with important ramifications for future American and Israeli deterrent policies.

The United States and Israel would seek to make maximum use of the time gained by a strike, not just in the hope that they could induce Iran to forgo its nuclear program but also to promote an effective international regime, which would make its reconsti-

5. Clawson and Eisenstadt, “Forcing Hard Choices on Tehran,” p. 26.

6. See for example, Moshe Yaalon, “Confronting Iran” (address to Hudson Institute, Washington, D.C., March 7, 2006); A. Herman, “Getting Serious about Iran: A Military Option,” *Commentary*, November 2006.

7. A. H. Cordesman, “Israeli and U.S. Strikes on Iran: A Speculative Analysis” (working draft, Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 5, 2007), p. 7; M. Fitzpatrick, “Can Iran’s Nuclear Capability Be Kept Latent?” *Survival* 49, no. 1 (March 2007).

tution harder should Iran nevertheless choose to proceed. Moreover, they would hope that a more moderate regime might emerge whose very character would diminish the threat—and which might possibly even be persuaded to dismantle the program.

Both the United States and Israel will be blamed for a possible attack and will suffer the consequences, regardless of who actually carries it out.⁸ A full dialogue would, therefore, also include a joint definition of what a successful attack would have to achieve—that is, which targets would have to be damaged or destroyed—to at least reach the minimum goal of a few years delay in Iran’s capabilities (for example, just nuclear targets, or command, control, and leadership facilities; additional military targets; and petroleum facilities). It would also include a discussion of the context and circumstances that might minimize the severity of the international backlash following a military strike, such as an Iranian withdrawal from the NPT, failure of all diplomatic efforts, or further major disclosures regarding Iran’s capabilities.⁹

If Israel has a military option. Assuming that Israel has a feasible, independent, military option, it might fear that the very act of raising the issue with the United States would risk a “veto,” that is, explicit U.S. opposition and possibly even clarification that if Israel were to go ahead anyway, it would be over American objections and at its own risk.¹⁰ Even if raised hypothetically or presented as a done deal of which Israel was merely informing the United States, the American position would be impossible to ignore. Indeed, the United States does not even have to give an explicit “veto” but can simply drag its feet for so long that a military strike becomes a moot issue. Similarly, the United States could impose a “de facto veto” on the operation by

flying American aircraft along potential Israeli attack routes. Israel would also be afraid of a leak, intentional or otherwise, to thwart its ability to carry out the attack. It may thus seek to refrain from placing itself in a potential veto situation,¹¹ much as it did in 1981, when it did not consult or inform the United States prior to attacking the Iraqi reactor at Osiraq.

In the event of an American veto, and in the face of a threat to its own existence, Israel would expect Washington to provide it with a satisfactory assurance of U.S. intent to destroy the Iranian program. As will be seen, the United States might hesitate to provide such an assurance, and Israel would fear that the United States might very well then raise the issue of possible means of living with the Iranian capability (such as American security guarantees) as an alternative to military action. This option is precisely what Israel will be most reluctant to entertain, at least until all other options are exhausted.

Conversely, informing Washington of an Israeli military option would relieve the United States of the responsibility for acting—something it might actually prefer and welcome. Given the clearly greater American capability to conduct a successful operation, Israel would prefer that the United States be the one to carry out an attack and would thus again be reluctant to discuss its own plans.¹²

If Israel does not have a military option. If Israel would be hesitant to apprise the United States of its ability and intent to launch a military option,¹³ it would likely be no less reluctant to divulge the absence of such an option. Again, for reasons both of comparative operational capabilities and of the ability to withstand Iranian, Arab, and international responses to an attack, Israel would prefer that the United States carry out a military strike.¹⁴ To the extent Israel’s own capa-

8. P. H. Gordon, “The Nuclear Challenge from Iran,” *Foresight Magazine*, May 2006.

9. E. Kam, “A Nuclear Iran: What Does It Mean, and What Can be Done,” *Memorandum* 88 (INSS, Tel Aviv, 2007), p. 40.

10. Ambassador Sam Lewis, closed meeting of experts and former officials at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 23, 2007; E. Kam, “Curbing the Iranian Nuclear Threat: The Military Option,” Jaffee Center, *Strategic Assessment* 7, no. 3 (December 2004); Rowan Scarborough, “Israel Pushes U.S. on Iran Nuke Solution,” *Washington Times*, February 21, 2005; L. Hadar, “Osirak Redux?” *The American Conservative*, January 15, 2007.

11. See for example, “Ya’alon’s Sensible ‘Gaffe,’” *Jerusalem Post*, March 13, 2006; Vice President Cheney, quoted in R. Scarborough, “Israel Pushes U.S. on Iran Nuke Solution,” *Washington Times*, February 21, 2005.

12. Uzi Mahnaimi, Marie Colvin, and Sarah Baxter, “Iran’s Psychopath in Chief, by Israel,” *Sunday Times* (London), April 30, 2006.

13. M. Karpin, “Will Israel Blast the Iranian Bomb?” *American Enterprise* 17, no. 2 (March 2006), p. 37.

bility to launch a military strike was doubted in Washington, however, Israel might fear that the pressure on the United States to conduct an attack would decrease. Thus, in both cases—whether Israel does or does not have an independent military option—it may be reluctant to discuss the issue with the United States.

If the United States has a military option. The United States may be similarly hesitant to discuss the issue with Israel, partly for similar reasons, although no doubt exists that America has the operational capacity to stage a major air campaign against Iran. First, for reasons of operational secrecy, if the United States does intend to act militarily, it will be hesitant to give a clear indication of this to leak-prone Israel, except at the last minute, as evinced by U.S. behavior in the two Gulf wars.

More fundamentally, the United States would presumably wish to keep its options open and refrain from making such a far-reaching commitment to Israel. The morass in Iraq and broad coincidence between the possible Iranian nuclear timeline and the American electoral cycle might also give the Bush administration difficulty in making such a commitment or one that would bind its successor.

Moreover, the United States may fear that its very willingness to discuss the issue of a military attack with Israel would partially legitimize the option and be interpreted by Israel as de facto approval for action. It would not be the first time that Israel has given a “liberal” interpretation to American positions: for example, then defense minister Sharon’s impression that Secretary of State Haig had given Israel implicit approval to go ahead with the 1982 invasion of Lebanon.

If the United States does not have a military option. If the United States concludes that it does not have an effective military option, or more plausibly, that

the consequences are prohibitive, it might be reluctant to inform Israel, fearing that Israel would interpret such a conclusion as justification for an independent Israeli strike. Given the higher probability of a successful American operation,¹⁵ the United States would certainly doubt the efficacy of an Israeli attack if the United States had concluded that it does not have an effective military option of its own. The last thing the United States (or Israel for that matter) would want to see would be an Israeli operation that fails to achieve its objectives but incurs all of the potentially serious political and security costs to the United States and Israel. As Vice President Cheney once warned, the United States may be left to clean up the mess and complete the job.¹⁶

(Red) blue and white? The question then is whether the United States would be willing to enter into a discussion with Israel on a “blue and white” (Israeli) military option and even to give its support or encouragement. The argument can be made—much as in the case of the Osiraq operation in 1981, when the United States was initially hostile and even imposed sanctions on Israel—that Israel should simply go ahead and the United States will ultimately come around. To a certain extent, Washington would have little choice, for the alternative would be to abandon Israel in extremis, when acting to defend itself from what the United States, too, perceives as a threat to its very existence.

One can also argue that the United States would actually like to see Israel go ahead without American advance knowledge.¹⁷ An Israeli operation would relieve the United States of responsibility for dealing with an issue to which it attaches great importance, not just for strategic reasons, but also as a moral commitment to Israel in the face of an existential—holocaust-like—threat. Unsupported Israeli action would also somewhat alleviate the appearances of what the

14. H. Sokolski and P. Clawson, eds., *Getting Ready for a Nuclear-Ready Iran* (Carlisle, Penn.: Strategic Studies Institute, 2005), p. 29; Karpin, “Will Israel Blast the Iranian Bomb?” p. 37; Cordesman, “Israeli and U.S. Strikes on Iran,” pp. 2, 4; Mahnaimi, Colvin, and Baxter, “Iran’s Psychopath in Chief, by Israel.”

15. Gordon, “The Nuclear Challenge from Iran.”

16. “Ya’alon’s Sensible ‘Gaffe.’”

17. See, for example, Vice President Cheney’s remarks in a January 2005 radio interview, suggesting that the United States might not be able to restrain Israel from acting, in Cordesman, “Israeli and U.S. Strikes on Iran,” p. 3.

Muslim world would portray as “collusion” in any event. At minimum, the specter of an Israeli attack provides the United States with leverage in its contacts with potential partners for sanctions and military action.¹⁸

In the event that Israel does decide to attack, which is likely only in the event that it concludes the United States will not act militarily,¹⁹ all other options have been exhausted, and sufficient intelligence exists, Israel could greatly benefit from United States assistance in a variety of areas. This aid could include intelligence on targets, defenses, and possible reprisals; “de-confliction,” including open air corridors²⁰ and IFF codes (identification friend/foe); and possible offensive capabilities, such as “bunker busters,” as well as defensive ones, such as the protection of Patriot missiles and AEGIS antimissile ships.

In any event, a comprehensive U.S.-Israeli dialogue would include a shared assessment of all operational requirements to ensure maximum prospects for a successful attack and especially full discussion of the means of coping with the consequences. Because both countries will likely be blamed, they have to be prepared to deal with the fallout on the diplomatic, economic, military, and counterterrorism levels. This preparation will require an in-depth discussion of the consequences of a “successful” attack and, no less important, of a failed one, or even an operationally successful attack but where heretofore unknown sites were subsequently found not to have been struck.

The bilateral dialogue would have to take the following possible Iranian reactions, among others, into account:

- An oil export cutoff by Iran and possibly additional producers as well, in a show of solidarity
- An Iranian blockade of the Straits of Hormuz, or mining of the Gulf, which would require broader military operations and might escalate

- Stepped-up Iranian and other terror against Israel and Israeli or Jewish targets around the world; against the United States, U.S. forces in the region, and U.S.-affiliated targets around the world; and heightened international terror as a whole
- Increased Iranian intervention in Iraq, designed to further undermine U.S. efforts there and gain even greater control
- A renewed Hizballah rocket attack on Israel, possibly leading to a significant new Israeli incursion into Lebanon and to further escalation
- Direct Iranian military attacks against Israel, U.S. forces in the region, and the United States itself²¹
- “Sympathy attacks” by various terrorist or extremist organizations around the world, in support for and identification with Iran

For Israel, the dangers inherent in an Iranian nuclear threat are so extreme that possible Iranian responses such as these would be a price worth paying. For the United States, however, the cost/benefit calculations would be more complex and harder to sell to a skeptical American public. Whereas the Israeli public appears to be deeply committed to dealing with the Iranian threat, considerations of timing, such as the presidential campaign, may have a far more significant impact on the American public’s willingness to confront the issue.

Alternatives to Military Action: Living with a Nuclear Iran

Under what conditions might the United States and Israel be willing, or compelled, to live with a nuclear Iran? Although a most unpleasant prospect for both and certainly contrary to their publicly articulated positions, the potential alternatives to military force

18. S. D. Sagan, “How to Keep the Bomb from Iran,” *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 5 (September/October 2006).

19. Fitzpatrick, “Can Iran’s Nuclear Capability Be Kept Latent?”

20. Aluf Benn, “Four Reasons for Ranting,” *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), January 19, 2000; S. Brom, “Is the Begin Doctrine Still a Viable Option for Israel?” in Sokolski and Clawson, eds., *Getting Ready for a Nuclear-Ready Iran*, pp. 148, 172.

21. See, for example, Yaalon, “Confronting Iran.”

will become salient if all other diplomatic options fail and the United States, Israel, or both come to the conclusion that an effective military operation is unfeasible or poses unacceptable costs.

Israel would presumably be more hesitant than the United States to engage in a discussion of the options for “living with” a nuclear Iran. It might fear that by even agreeing to discuss the issue, it would be signaling willingness to forgo military options and to countenance a nuclear Iran, and that the United States would therefore feel freer to explore means of containing and deterring the threat, rather than focusing solely on its elimination.²² Given the stakes for Israel, this option might simply be too risky. Americans may consider this type of dialogue a self-evident necessity and may be surprised at the thought that Israel could be hesitant to engage in one, much as the United States has conducted, at least to some degree, with NATO partners and other allies.²³ Nonetheless, such hesitancy is deeply ingrained in Israeli strategic thinking.

The United States, too, will be at least somewhat reluctant to raise the options for living with a nuclear Iran, possibly no less so than Israel, despite its experience in handling issues such as these with other allies in the past. Washington might fear that Israel would view a discussion of this nature as a signal that the United States does not intend to act militarily, and that Israel might consider this a justification for conducting an independent military option. Similarly, the United States might not wish to confront some of the possible options for living with a nuclear Iran, such as a change in the Israeli policy of nuclear ambiguity.

For Israel, the Iranian threat is perceived to be so dire and imminent that any diminution in the U.S. commitment to bring about its elimination would be viewed with alarm. Not that Israel harbors any illusions. The possible failure of other options, or absence of better ones, makes the need to explore the options

for living with a nuclear Iran clear. Rather, the question is one of timing, in the hope that these alternatives will be a last resort if all preventive options have failed.

Alternative 1: Unilateral U.S. Deterrence of Iran

In this case, the United States would adopt a clear declaratory policy toward Iran, stating that it would view the use, or threat of use, of nuclear weapons against Israel (or alternatively, any state in the region) as a threat against the United States. It would then marshal all of the power at its disposal to thwart the threat and, if nuclear weapons were actually used, would respond devastatingly, with nuclear weapons of its own.²⁴

Most countries in the region, Iran included, already believe that Israel enjoys a de facto American security guarantee and nuclear umbrella. An open declaratory commitment of this sort, although politically inflammatory for the Arab world, would not be viewed as a dramatic new step, especially following President Bush’s repeated, if somewhat less explicit, statements regarding the U.S. commitment to Israel’s security.²⁵ Many Israelis, too, presume the existence of a de facto American commitment, and a further verbal expression of it will not necessarily ease their threat perception meaningfully.

Deterrence, nonetheless, remains a primary option. Moreover, the case can be made that Israel’s own strategic capabilities, both offensive and defensive (Arrow antimissile system), when further buttressed by “extended” U.S. deterrence, would be a sufficient response to the Iranian threat. To refute this approach would require imputing irrationality to Iranian behavior, or at a minimum, severe miscalculation.

Nevertheless, whether Israel, or even the United States, would find a deterrent posture sufficient is questionable. Although many observers, this author

22. As indicated by Giora Eiland, quoted in H. De Quetteville, “Israel Readies for Iran,” *Sunday Telegraph* (London), August 28, 2006.

23. Former ambassador Thomas Pickering, telephone conversation with author, April 26, 2007.

24. See, for example, T. G. Carpenter, “Iran’s Nuclear Program: America’s Policy Options,” *Policy Analysis* no. 577, (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, September 20, 2006), p. 9.

25. P. Baker, L. Dafna, and T. E. Ricks, “U.S. Is Studying Military Strike Options on Iran; Any Mix of Tact, Threats Alarms Critics,” *Washington Post*, April 9, 2006; “If Only Iran’s Nuclear Nutter Had Stuck to Traffic Planning,” *Daily Telegraph* (London), December 18, 2005.

included, view Iran for the most part as a “rational,” carefully calculating player, this has not been the case in its policies toward the United States—and certainly not toward Israel, to whose destruction the Islamic regime bears a deep theological commitment. That the regime is “probably” rational or is so “to the best of our knowledge” will not assuage Israel’s fears—nor even those of the United States—when its very existence is at stake. The possibility that Iranian “rationality” differs from a Western view, that otherwise “unacceptable” consequences might be acceptable for Iran’s theological and apocalyptic regime, is at the very heart of both American and Israeli fears. Indeed, as former Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani once indicated, Israel largely is “a one-bomb country.”²⁶

Moreover, the primary danger posed by an Iranian nuclear capability may not be of an intentional, planned attack, a “bolt out of the blue,” but of an initially limited regional deterioration (such as that described in the opening paragraph of this study’s Introduction) that leads to a major escalation. In other words, the primary danger posed may be a lower-level confrontation between Israel and its Arab neighbors or a nonstate player, such as Hizballah, that then escalates into a broader regional conflict in which Iran may be tempted to bring its newfound nuclear influence to bear. An escalatory process of this sort could reach heights that no one intended, in which the introduction of nuclear weapons changes the fundamental dynamics of the sides’ strategic calculus. Similarly, a nuclear crisis could evolve out of an escalatory process between Iran and one of its other regional neighbors.

At a bare minimum, an Iranian nuclear capability would have a major, possibly decisive, effect on Israeli and U.S. crisis decisionmaking. One of the primary justifications given for the American national missile defense system during the policy debate in the 1990s was not the fear that U.S. deterrence would fail and that it would actually be attacked by WMD, but that the United States was simply unwilling to permit any country to influence its crisis decisionmaking

processes. Possible scenarios for the U.S.-Israeli dialogue would thus include not just the prospects of Iran actually using nuclear weapons, but also various ways by which Iran could project its new nuclear power—for example, a nuclear dictate that Israel cease advancing in a winning situation, withdraw in defeat in a losing one, or simply cede territory.²⁷ Whether or not Iran can be expected to actually behave in this manner, the “risk assessment” calculations are daunting and would certainly color Israel’s approach in any dialogue with the United States.

Alternative 2: Direct U.S. Security Guarantees for Israel

One means of further increasing the value of extended American deterrence for Israel would be to formalize it, whether in a written document, such as a bilateral defense treaty, a joint congressional resolution, an executive agreement (memorandum of understanding), or even just a presidential declaration. The guarantee could take the form of an overall commitment to Israel’s security or be more narrowly focused on WMD or even purely nuclear threats. The broader, more public, and formalized the security guarantee, the greater its deterrent value, but also the greater the obstacles to the two sides’ ability to reach agreement.

Assuming U.S. willingness to provide a formal commitment—a significant “if”—Israel would come under an explicit American nuclear “umbrella.” Iran would know that in threatening Israel, it would be taking on the United States as well and thus face “assured destruction” beyond that already provided by Israel’s own capabilities. A U.S. security guarantee might also have a number of additional, indirect benefits for Israel, such as enabling it to reduce its defense expenditures, much as NATO and other U.S. allies have long done and, like them, allowing it to focus more on domestic issues. A formal agreement would serve as a long-term foundation for U.S.-Israeli relations and ensure Israel’s standing in the United States in the future at a time when the pro-Israel community may be less influential and

26. Cordesman, “Israeli and U.S. Strikes on Iran,” p. 2.

27. G. Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism* (New York: Times Books, 2004), p. 36.

the administration and Congress less friendly than at present. Depending on the nature of the guarantee, it might also be relevant to future peace agreements and enable Israel to take greater security risks than it might otherwise contemplate.²⁸

A “tripwire” mechanism, such as the permanent deployment of U.S. forces, or Patriot missiles, in Israel, could further augment the guarantee. Other options include Israel’s inclusion in the multilayered U.S. global antimissile system (AEGIS ships, Theater High-Altitude Area Defense [THAAD] and other systems), its participation in the defense planning processes of EUCOM (or CENTCOM), or a permanent direct link to U.S. satellite warning systems.

A U.S. security guarantee might seem to be a “no brainer” for Israel, even if the U.S. demanded in return, for example, that Israel forgo an independent military option against Iran. Nevertheless, for three primary reasons, each deeply entrenched in Israel’s national security thinking, Israel is likely to be quite reluctant to base its national security on a security relationship of this nature:

- Because of the contractual requirement to consult on the means of addressing the threat, Israel would fear that a security guarantee would diminish its freedom of action, either about threats directly pertaining to Iran or, depending on the scope of the agreement, additional areas as well.²⁹
- Israel might be concerned that the United States would demand, in exchange for the guarantee, that Israel divulge its independent strategic capabilities, at least to the United States, and possibly even dismantle them.³⁰ Israel developed its strategic capabilities precisely for existential scenarios such as the

Iranian one, and whether it would consider any further constraints in this area is questionable.

- Even though Israel recognizes that the United States has a favorable record of fulfilling its security commitments, exceptions have occurred. Like the NATO allies during the Cold War, Israel would fear that the United States might not live up to its nuclear commitments when the crunch came. Moreover, the possibility of an attack by an Iranian proxy, such as Hizballah, might make identification of the source of the threat difficult and diminish U.S. ability, or inclination, to live up to its commitments.³¹

A number of additional factors, important in their own right but secondary to the preceding considerations, would affect Israel’s interest in a U.S. security guarantee. One factor is the fear that becoming a direct American ward would lead to long-term erosion among Israel’s citizenry of its traditional and deeply held ethic of self-reliance, or of the similar erosion of popular support for Israel among the American public. Thus, Israel is likely to be willing to consider a U.S. security guarantee, as well as other options for “living with” an Iranian bomb, only if all other possible options (diplomatic and military) have been exhausted.³²

Moreover, although the United States has undertaken numerous defense commitments over the years, it has not signed a formal defense treaty with any country for decades. Precisely because the United States does take its commitments seriously, it is wary of making them. This concern may hold especially true in a region in which the prospects of the guarantee actually being invoked are considerably higher than in many previous cases of this sort. Although the United States might deem a security guarantee for Israel an appropriate and

28. C. Freilich and R. Rosecrance, “Confronting Iran: A US Security Guarantee for Israel?” *bitterlemons-international.org*, Middle East Roundtable, Edition 25, Volume 4, July 6, 2006.
 29. G. Steinberg, “Walking the Tightrope: Israeli Options in Response to Iranian Nuclear Developments,” in J. S. Yaphe and C. D. Lutes, *Reassessing the Implications of a Nuclear-Armed Iran*, McNair Paper 69 (Washington, D.C.: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, 2005), p. 99. Available online (www.ndu.edu/inss/mcnair/mcnair69/McNairPDF.pdf).
 30. *Ibid.*, p. 100; Geoffrey Kemp, closed experts meeting, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 18, 2007.
 31. Freilich and Rosecrance, “Confronting Iran: A US Security Guarantee for Israel?”
 32. *Ibid.*

sufficient response to the threat Iran poses, its willingness to provide one, at terms acceptable to Israel, is not a forgone conclusion. Some former senior U.S. officials even believe that an attempt to conclude an overall security treaty, as opposed to a narrow or informal one limited, for example, to nuclear threats, might backfire and end up accentuating the differences between the two countries rather than the closeness of the relationship.³³ The successful conclusion of a memorandum of understanding limited to the missile threat in 1998 may be one indication of the greater utility of adopting this narrower, focused approach.³⁴

In reality, Israel has long consulted with the United States on virtually all strategic matters, including Iran, and has made few decisions of consequence in recent decades without first doing so. The “American factor” is, indeed, a decisive consideration in virtually all Israeli national security decisions—as the United States knows well and sees fit to reinforce on occasion. The 1981 bombing of the Iraqi reactor in Osiraq was a rare, important, and yet possibly indicative exception to this general rule.

Alternative 3: A Multilateral Guarantee

Israel has many reasons for wishing to upgrade its relationship with NATO, and the United States may attach benefit to such an improvement as well. Nevertheless, if Israel might hesitate to place its trust and fate in a bilateral security agreement with the United States, it will certainly be loath to do so with an alliance of twenty-six nations, not all of whom are very favorably disposed to Israel and whose commitment to Israeli security and well-being is limited. Even assuming goodwill and a commitment to live up to its obligations, the NATO decisionmaking process would probably be so protracted as to make it a moot point for Israel in times of crisis.

This conclusion is not to argue that no role exists for NATO in countering the Iranian nuclear threat. As part of a package, based first on a U.S. guarantee, it

might serve some additional purpose. It does not, however, appear to be a viable alternative to a U.S. role.

Additional options for multilateral security guarantees for Israel (or all states in the region facing a nuclear threat) might include a joint U.S.-Russian one or a collective guarantee of the five permanent members of the Security Council. As in the case of NATO, Israel would be most reluctant to place its faith in multilateral agreements. However, to the extent that they might serve to provide the United States with diplomatic cover, or window dressing, and make the guarantees more palatable for Iran, Arab countries, and others, such multilateral arrangements might prove feasible and attractive if coupled with a firm bilateral U.S.-Israeli agreement.

Alternative 4: A Regional Security System

A further variation on the security guarantee option is for the United States to establish a regional security system that includes U.S. guarantees to countries in the region.³⁵ The guarantees could be a general commitment to these countries’ security and territorial integrity, or a more narrowly defined one, limited to nuclear or WMD attack. For both the United States and Israel, this alternative has the benefit of adding a stabilizing element to the region as a whole and of alleviating Arab anger over what would otherwise be a one-sided commitment to Israel.

The very breadth of the arrangement, however, is also its primary drawback. It is highly questionable how many of the countries in the region would be interested in joining such an arrangement, especially one of which Israel was a part, and that would presumably include a U.S. demand that they forgo their WMD programs. Iran and Syria would undoubtedly refuse, even in exchange for a U.S. commitment to forgo regime change and to guarantee their security. Both they and Saudi Arabia are far from being willing to join a regional security

33. Closed meeting of experts and former senior officials, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 18, 2007.

34. U.S.-Israel Security Memorandum of Agreement, October 31, 1998. Available online (www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/US-Israel/moa98.html).

35. F. Leverett, *Dealing with Tehran: Assessing U.S. Diplomatic Options toward Iran* (New York and Washington, D.C.: Century Foundation, 2006), p. 24 (available online at www.tcf.org/publications/internationalaffairs/leverett_diplomatic.pdf); Clawson and Eisenstadt, “Forcing Hard Choices on Tehran,” pp. 17–18.

framework with Israel, or each other for that matter, and at least for the foreseeable future, they would not be willing to do so even with the United States. A regional system limited to U.S. allies (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, the Maghreb countries, and Israel) would presumably also run into similar obstacles.

Alternatively, the United States could declare a unilateral commitment to the territorial integrity and security of the states in the area without singling out Israel, but making clear, unofficially, who the commitment is designed to support and, officially, that it will not be applied in support of states that initiate the use, or threaten the use, of WMD. This option would ease the U.S. diplomatic problem vis-à-vis the Arab countries and might be acceptable for Israel, as well.

Separate bilateral agreements, foremost with Israel, might buttress a broad regional commitment. Israel, however, has made clear in the past that it will consider limiting its own strategic capabilities only if this limitation applies to *all* potential adversaries in the broader region and within the context of a regional peace settlement.³⁶ Security guarantees for additional countries in the region might thus be of benefit for both Israel and the United States, but do not appear practicable for the near future.

As an alternative to a formal regional security structure, the United States and Israel could seek to leverage to their advantage the Sunni states' fear of the Iranian nuclear program. Although Arab pressure on Iran is certainly one of the important tools at the United States' disposal, that shared fear is most unlikely to be sufficient to bring those countries to participate in any cooperative measures with Israel.

Alternative 5: Changes in Israel's Nuclear Ambiguity

A change in Israel's long-term policy of nuclear ambiguity is obviously one of the possible responses to an Iranian nuclear capability.³⁷ It is commonly assumed that Israel is a nuclear power, and that the United States is fully aware of Israel's capability but will not press the issue as long as Israel refrains from an open declaration of its capabilities and lives up to additional conditions. Unlike proliferators such as India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Iran, who have all been the focus of some degree of American sanctions, a joint U.S.-Israeli understanding (the "Nixon-Golda Agreement")³⁸ has reportedly enabled the United States to view Israel as a special case and refrain from exercising its overall non-proliferation policy toward Israel. A change in Israel's ambiguous status would thus run counter to a successful forty-year-long practice.

Having agreed to live with a purported Israeli nuclear capability for so long, the emergence of an Iranian nuclear capability, declared or assumed, might provide the United States with a pretext for openly legitimizing what it has only implicitly accepted until now. For Israel, too, the circumstances might be more diplomatically conducive to a change in policy.³⁹ An end to nuclear ambiguity, however, might further inflame fears among the Sunni regimes and spur them to redouble their efforts to promote nuclear programs of their own.

The fundamental question, then, is whether an end to ambiguity makes a significant contribution to Israeli deterrence in the face of an imminent or declared Iranian nuclear capability and thus contributes to the bilateral U.S.-Israeli dialogue on the issue.

36. Address of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, UN General Assembly, June 7, 1988, reprinted in *Arms Control in the Middle East*, ed. Dore Gold (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 1990); M. Adler, "Arab States Push for Denunciation of Israel as Nuclear Threat," *Agence France-Presse*, September 30, 2005.

37. B. Posen, "We Can Live with a Nuclear Iran," Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Mass., March 2006; Cordesman, "Israeli and U.S. Strikes on Iran," p. 4; Steinberg, "Walking the Tightrope: Israeli Options in Response to Iranian Nuclear Developments," in Yaphe and Lutes, *Reassessing the Implications of a Nuclear-Armed Iran*, p. 79 (available online at www.ndu.edu/inss/mcnair/mcnair69/McNairPDF.pdf).

38. "Nixon-Meir Understanding of 1969," *Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 2006; Joshua Mitnick, "Why Israel Maintains Nuclear Ambiguity," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 14, 2006; "Israel Crosses the Threshold," National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 189, posted April 28, 2006 (available online at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB189/index.htm); G. Bahgat, "Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East: Iran and Israel," *Contemporary Security Policy* 26, no. 1 (April 2005), pp. 25–43.

39. Posen, "We Can Live with a Nuclear Iran"; Sokolski and Clawson, eds., *Getting Ready for a Nuclear-Ready Iran*, pp. 3, 8; Cordesman, "Israeli and U.S. Strikes on Iran," p. 17.

Removing any lingering doubts regarding Israel's nuclear status, especially if it was thought that Israel had a guaranteed second-strike capability, would presumably add some measure of clarity and thus of deterrence.⁴⁰ In point of fact, however, Iran must take into account, at least for planning purposes, that Israel is already thought to possess a nuclear arsenal; thus, the added utility of an end to ambiguity would appear to be marginal.⁴¹ Moreover, an end to Israeli ambiguity might further spur Arab nuclear development programs. Therefore, the United States and Israel would have to address whether this marginal increase in deterrent value, in itself or as part of a broader package, would justify the costs.

Alternative 6: Regime Change

As a basis for living with a nuclear Iran, the idea of regime change has been raised for years, the assumption being that a nuclear capability in the hands of a more moderate regime would not pose an unacceptable danger. Much in the way that the United States and Israel accepted Pakistan's nuclear capability—on the assumption that this “Islamic bomb” did not pose an unacceptable danger⁴²—a nuclear, but moderate Iran, might also be acceptable.

The regime change approach raises a number of fundamental problems. Twenty-eight years after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, and despite the considerable attention devoted to fomenting regime change in Tehran, no one has yet devised a practical strategy for doing so. Although it is the preferred policy of the Bush administration, there are no signs of imminent change. Even assuming the ability to promote regime change, no guarantee exists that a future regime will be more moderate and more favorably disposed to the United States, or Israel, than at present.

Moreover, in the race between the two competing timelines, regime change and an operational nuclear capability, the latter appears likely to win by a long shot.⁴³ Although an important option in the overall issue of the threat posed by Iran, regime change is thus not a practical solution to the nuclear issue. The ascendancy of a moderate government would, however, raise the possibility of rollback.

Alternative 7: Promoting the Peace Process

A further policy option is to promote the Middle East peace process as a means of countering Iranian influence in the region, thereby reducing the room for friction between Israel and Iran and the danger of a potentially nuclear escalation. At present, Israel faces an Iranian threat on virtually all fronts. Hizballah, founded by Iran following the 1982 war in Lebanon, is its direct proxy. Hamas, now in power in Gaza and possibly soon to gain power in the West Bank, as well as other Palestinian terrorist organizations, such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad, have developed close relations with Iran, especially since the 2006 war in Lebanon, and they view Hizballah as a model to be emulated. Furthermore, Syria has developed an increasingly close military alliance with Iran.

In theory, progress on the peace process could curtail Iran's ability to cause Israel indirect harm by proxy and would require that Iran launch an open, direct attack by missiles or aircraft. A peace settlement with either the Palestinians or Syrians, or at least major progress, could be made contingent on an end to their military relations with Iran. In the Syrian case, it would also greatly reduce Iran's ability to support Hizballah. A counterargument is that the unwelcome

40. Steinberg, “Walking the Tightrope: Israeli Options in Response to Iranian Nuclear Developments,” in Yaphe and Lutes, *Reassessing the Implications of a Nuclear-Armed Iran*, p. 79. Available online (www.ndu.edu/inss/mcnair/mcnair69/McNairPDF.pdf).

41. A. H. Cordesman and K. R. al-Rodhan, “Iranian Nuclear Weapons? Options for Sanctions and Military Strikes,” (working draft, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 30, 2006), p. 45; Cordesman, “Israeli and U.S. Strikes on Iran,” p. 4; J. Logan, *The Bottom Line on Iran: The Costs and Benefits of Preventive War versus Deterrence* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 2006), p. 17; Trita Parsi, “Is Nuclear Parity with Iran a Blessing in Disguise for Israel?” *Jane's Intelligence Review*, January 1, 2006; Bahgat, “Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East: Iran and Israel”; Carpenter, “Iran's Nuclear Program: America's Policy Options,” p. 10.

42. Brom, “Is the Begin Doctrine Still a Viable Option for Israel?,” p. 141.

43. Leverett, *Dealing with Tehran*, p. 5.

specter, from Iran’s perspective, of progress toward peace might actually lead it to deepen its involvement in the region, to undermine the process.

In any event, neither the United States nor Israel is likely to substantively adjust its policies on the peace process as a means of dealing with the Iranian nuclear

threat. Although a “peace initiative” could be launched as a means of encouraging Arab support for U.S. efforts to isolate Iran, both the United States and Israel would tend to view this as a separate issue, warranted in its own right, but one that might affect the Iranian issue only indirectly, at best.

Speaking about the Unspeakable

THE GREAT AMERICAN satirist, Tom Lehrer, once famously quipped, in regard to people who encounter problems talking to each other (couples, parents and children, friends), that “if they cannot communicate, the very least they can do is to shut up.” A recommendation of dubious utility for interpersonal relationships, it is certainly inappropriate to strategic issues of the magnitude of the Iranian nuclear program. A U.S.-Israeli failure to communicate on this vital issue may lead to misunderstandings and miscalculations, with unintended and potentially severe consequences.

Israel’s determination to launch a strike of its own obviously would be deeply affected by its understanding of the intended American strategy, especially of the likelihood of a military strike. Were Israel confident of the latter, it would clearly be willing to hold its fire. Similarly, its willingness to discuss options for living with a nuclear Iran would be affected by a better appreciation of American policy and of the deterrent options the United States would be willing to consider. In the absence of dialogue, Israel may be driven to avoidable measures or less effective ones than those at the disposal of the United States.

The United States, for its part, may miss opportunities to deal with the issue in the manner it deems most effective, or preferable, and may be left to deal with the consequences of actions to which it was not a party. Although Israel’s positions are certainly less critical for American decisionmaking than vice versa, the ways in which this issue plays out will have major regional and even global ramifications for the United States. Indeed, the United States traditionally demands of Israel that it conduct a policy of “zero surprises,” even on issues of far less importance.

A comprehensive U.S.-Israeli dialogue on the Iranian nuclear threat is thus essential, not only for Israel, for whom the stakes are the highest, but also

for the United States. At least two major additional considerations make the need for in-depth joint consultation on this issue particularly important. First, the huge American military presence in the region today would presumably make “de-confliction” between Israeli and U.S. forces essential—that is, measures to ensure that they do not interfere with, or open fire at, each other.¹ Second, given the likelihood of a significant Iranian response against both the United States and Israel, regardless of who actually acts, both countries would expect advance warning. Were Israel to act alone, it would risk a rift with the United States. Indeed, it is hard to imagine either country acting without providing the other with at least some advance warning.

The obstacles to a bilateral dialogue appear to be concentrated in two primary areas:

- A shared hesitancy to discuss military options, including each side’s intentions and capabilities, as well as the nature, circumstances, timing, and ramifications of the various options
- A primarily, though not solely, Israeli reluctance to discuss the possible alternatives to military action, that is, means of living with a nuclear Iran, once it has, or is thought to have, a nuclear capability

If not for such potential obstacles to dialogue, both countries would presumably already be deeply engaged in comprehensive discussions. Indeed, they may have surmounted the obstacles and already be engaged in a dialogue of this sort, or they may be seeking the modalities necessary to enable them to do so. To the extent that the latter is the case, the following section seeks to identify possible means of “speaking about the unspeakable.”

1. S. Brom, “Is the Begin Doctrine Still a Viable Option for Israel?” in H. Sokolski and P. Clawson, eds., *Getting Ready for a Nuclear-Ready Iran* (Carlisle, Penn.: Strategic Studies Institute, 2005), pp. 148, 172; T. G. Carpenter, “Iran’s Nuclear Program: America’s Policy Options,” *Policy Analysis* no. 577 (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, September 20, 2006), p. 8; Aluf Benn, “Four Reasons for Ranting,” *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), January 19, 2007.

Overcoming Obstacles to Dialogue on Military Options

As noted, a number of bilateral forums for strategic exchanges already exist, including the JPMG and “Strategic Dialogue.” As currently constituted, however, these forums are either too large or insufficiently senior to provide a suitable mechanism for the type of highly intimate discussion required on the Iranian nuclear issue. The question, however, is not truly one of format, which can be resolved, but of a mutual willingness to engage substantively on this issue.

Option 1: “Constructive circumlocution.” This option involves general, almost generic discussion of such issues as the target sets that would have to be damaged or destroyed if “someone” were to launch a strike, the likely outcomes of the strike in terms of the nuclear program itself, potential Iranian responses, and regional and international ramifications. The discussion could even begin with more-benign issues, such as the prospects of promoting regime change. This type of detailed but noncommittal dialogue, which broaches the practical issues without touching on intentions, might be appropriate for a bottom-up (but nonetheless senior) dialogue. The forums would have to be small and highly discreet, and the truly difficult questions would not be directly addressed, but this option might at least provide a start, get the sides engaged, and pave the way for more-concrete discussions at the highest levels at a later stage.

Option 2: “Four eyes.” A second approach is a top-down one, where the American president and Israeli premier hold a discreet one-on-one meeting or include at most one or two very senior officials from each side. In this type of intimate setting, the prospects for a relatively open heart-to-heart exchange increase and the sides might be somewhat more willing to at least indicate their general intent, or overall considerations, if not to make actual commitments. The downside is, of course, that this approach may immediately run into the various obstacles to dialogue enumerated in this study. The Nixon-Golda understanding of 1969 is a rare and particularly important example of the two

countries’ ability to successfully engage on highly sensitive issues and keep them secret for many years.

A further problem with this approach is that it forces the leaders to address critical issues, with far-reaching strategic ramifications, without the full input and participation of their advisors and agencies. Because the issues to be addressed are relatively clear, however, this problem could be partially overcome, at least in the early stages, by “pregaming” positions to be presented. More-advanced and detailed discussions would require the participation of additional officials, again of senior status, and in any event in small and discrete forums.

Option 3: Special emissaries. This option is akin to the approach in option 2, but it does not directly involve the respective heads of state and provides for somewhat greater flexibility and deniability. Each leader would appoint a very senior representative who enjoys his confidence and has direct access to him. The two emissaries would feel out the other side’s positions and seek to lay the basis for a broader and official dialogue or at least to reach a common understanding of the other’s thinking. Here, too, they would have to conduct the dialogue in the greatest secrecy.

Option 4: Unofficial talks. A further way of broaching the topic, of at least beginning some bilateral discussion of the issues, would be through a “track 2” approach (former officials, academics, journalists, and other knowledgeable participants from each side), or even better, a “track 1.5” approach (the former, together with some serving officials, participating on an informal and nonbinding basis). The problem with this type of approach is that the issues at hand may now be too pressing, critical, and confidential in nature for the participants to make other than informed assessments, whereas hard decisions may soon be required. Nonetheless, it may be a start and does not appear to have a downside.

U.S. experience in overcoming similar problems in dialogues with allies during the Cold War may constitute something of a model for surmounting the obstacles to open and comprehensive dialogue with Israel on the Iranian issue. By way of example, both Britain

and France retained independent nuclear capabilities under the umbrella of a NATO/U.S. guarantee. Canada, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand found bilateral U.S. commitments to their security to be sufficient responses to the nuclear threats they faced (Canada was also a member of NATO). At least some of the potential obstacles to a U.S.-Israeli dialogue presumably arose in those cases, and the means developed for circumventing them might be of value in the present case as well.

U.S. and Israeli willingness to engage in a bilateral dialogue on military options will increase greatly if and when they conclude that both sanctions and quasi-military options have run their course. Similarly, their wish to talk will grow if one of the sides decides the time has come to launch a military operation of its own or believes that the other has decided to do so.

Overcoming Obstacles to Dialogue on Other Options

In overcoming the obstacles to dialogue on how to “live with” a nuclear Iran, all of the previous process-based solutions would be feasible. Here, however, substantive means of overcoming the obstacles would be no less important.

On the process level, the sides could discuss the means of living with a nuclear Iran as part of an overall discussion of various ways of upgrading the bilateral strategic relationship, without reference to the Iranian threat or any other specific context. By adopting a generic “capabilities-based” approach, rather than a “threat-based” one (Iran), the two countries could speak of the various scenarios that might require them to upgrade their strategic relationship and the overall pros, cons, and costs of the options for doing so. Thus, by way of example, they would speak of the common response if “some” Middle Eastern country achieved a nuclear capability, or generally of a U.S. security guar-

antee, without reference to a specific threat scenario.

Although this procedural mechanism would not fully resolve the obstacles to open dialogue, it would at least provide a start that various substantive considerations would further reinforce. Of the various options for living with a nuclear Iran, the obstacles to open dialogue are paramount in two areas: those options having to do with security guarantees, whether bilateral, multilateral, or regional, and a possible end to Israel’s policy of ambiguity. Since the latter does not appear likely, the following analysis focuses only on security guarantees.

Israel’s deep-seated fear of a loss of freedom of maneuver as a consequence of a U.S. security guarantee² may be more extreme than that harbored by U.S. allies in the past, but it is not unique. Previous U.S. defense agreements—for example, the Polaris Agreement with Britain in 1962—have implicitly recognized this problem in cases of “supreme national interest” and have thus included exemptions from the commitment to joint consultation. Israel could demand a similar clause. Furthermore, the guarantee could be limited to existential dangers, thereby alleviating the Israeli fear of loss of freedom of maneuver in lesser situations, such as future confrontations with Hizballah, the Palestinians, or Syria. Likewise, the United States would probably not wish to be entangled in issues such as these, which Israel is capable of handling on its own.³

The possibility that the United States might demand that Israel divulge and even dismantle its purported nuclear option as a price of a security guarantee cannot be dismissed. For Israel, this demand would likely be a deal breaker, even if all other options for countering the Iranian nuclear program have been exhausted. In those circumstances, Israel might prefer to proceed alone, rather than compromise its own capabilities.

Formal diplomatic positions notwithstanding, the United States may actually have an interest in Israel’s

2. G. Steinberg, “Walking the Tightrope: Israeli Options in Response to Iranian Nuclear Developments,” in J. S. Yaphe and C. D. Lutes, *Reassessing the Implications of a Nuclear-Armed Iran*, McNair Paper 69 (Washington, D.C.: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, 2005), p. 99. Available online (www.ndu.edu/inss/mcnair/mcnair69/McNairPDE.pdf).

3. C. Freilich and R. Rosecrance, “Confronting Iran: A U.S. Security Guarantee for Israel?” *bitterlemons-international.org*, Middle East Roundtable, Edition 25, volume 4, July 6, 2006.

retaining its independent strategic capabilities. In any event, whether the United States would insist that Israel divulge or dismantle those capabilities is questionable. First, the existence of an independent Israeli capability greatly reduces the prospects of the United States' ever being called upon to invoke the guarantee and to come to Israel's aid.⁴ Second, the whole point of the security guarantee would be to strengthen Israel's sense of security, as part of an American attempt to dissuade it from independent military action, and to increase Israel's willingness to consider options for living with a nuclear Iran. Demanding that Israel forgo its ultimate capabilities would hardly be a way to achieve those ends. Finally, the United States would have to take into account that when faced with issues of its basic existence, Israel will ultimately act unilaterally, formal commitments notwithstanding. The benefits of obtaining an Israeli commitment to consult under these circumstances may outweigh the unlikely prospects of Israel's agreeing to disclose, let alone dismantle, its independent deterrent capabilities.

Even if the United States believes that engaging in a dialogue on the proposed options for living with a nuclear Iran is still premature, it would probably be more disposed to do so than Israel. Indeed, for the United States a dialogue of this sort would be somewhat similar to those it has held with NATO and other allies in the past. Israel, in contrast, would appear willing to engage in such a dialogue only at the latest date possible, when it comes to the conclusion that all other options have failed or have proven unfeasible, including both an American or Israeli military strike. For Israel, the most opportune timing to obtain maximal American security guarantees is before, not after, Iran achieves a nuclear capability.

In addition to the preceding options for living with a nuclear Iran, a comprehensive U.S.-Israeli dialogue would also include discussion of the following:

- Lines of communication—for example, how to maintain direct communications between them-

selves and, even more important, with a nuclear Iran, to prevent misunderstandings that might lead to nuclear crises.

- “Rules of the game”—understandings between themselves and with Iran on how to deal with an emerging crisis (or one that has already emerged) and how to prevent it from further deteriorating.
- Rollback—means of continuing to apply pressure on Iran to limit or dismantle its nuclear program in the future, even after it has already achieved an operational capability.⁵ These means would be designed to complement the preceding options and could include ongoing and even heightened sanctions, security guarantees, and regime change.

Launching a Bilateral Dialogue

Ideally, a U.S.-Israeli dialogue on the Iranian nuclear threat would encompass an in-depth, comprehensive discussion of all options for dealing with the problem and the formulation of a joint strategy, tailored to each stage of the nuclear development process. At this point, each of these stages, prior to Iran's achievement of an operational nuclear capability, may last no more than a matter of months, and distinguishing between them may prove difficult. They include the following:

- The current situation and as long as the United States and Israel share some limited hope for a diplomatic solution. Given that both believe the diplomatic route is ultimately doomed to fail, how long this residual hope will last is unclear, as is what would constitute clear evidence of failure.
- After diplomatic and quasi-military measures (e.g., naval embargo) have clearly failed.
- As Iran approaches an actual nuclear capability, that is, the ability to produce sufficient fissile material for a first bomb.

4. Ibid.

5. Sokolski and Clawson, eds., *Getting Ready for a Nuclear-Ready Iran*, p. 190.

- When Iran actually has, or is thought to have, an operational nuclear capability.

Regardless of how the dialogue begins, it must reach the presidential–prime ministerial level rapidly. Only at that level can the parties either deal with the truly difficult issues at the outset (military options, living with a nuclear Iran), or sanction the beginning of a lower, working-level dialogue. In the latter case, the dialogue could begin with issues such as those set out in the next paragraph and, as events developed and mutual confidence in the dialogue grew, could come to encompass the highly sensitive issues, as well.

The following are some of the issues for early dialogue:

- Iran’s basic motivations for acquiring a nuclear capability and the extent to which it is designed for defensive purposes and maintenance of the status quo, or for power projection and actual use. These considerations might enable a joint assessment, at a later stage, of one of the most critical issues: whether Iran is indeed thought to be deterrable and, if so, the nature of the deterrent measures required.⁶
- The possible nuclear postures Iran could adopt, including
 - Reaching the operational nuclear threshold, without actual weaponization, such as the “Japanese model”
 - Nuclear ambiguity, that is, an undeclared capability, akin to the purported Israeli approach
 - An open, declared, capability—the “Pakistani model”
 - The preceding models together with a variety of delivery means—ballistic and cruise missiles,

planes, submarines, or nontraditional ones (e.g., vehicles, shipping containers)⁷

- The target sets to be damaged or destroyed if “someone” were to launch an attack.
- The likely outcomes and utilities of various options for a military strike (rather than each side’s strategy and attack plan), in terms of the nuclear program itself; in other words, what could actually be achieved, and whether this would serve to increase or decrease Iran’s determination to renew the program.
- Potential Iranian responses and their ramifications, diplomatic (e.g., withdrawal from the NPT), economic (e.g., oil export embargo, closing of shipping lanes), and military or terrorist against U.S., Israeli, and third-party targets.
- Regional and international ramifications of a potentially multinuclear Middle East, if additional states choose to develop nuclear capabilities in response to Iran, as well as consequences for the future of the entire global nonproliferation regime.

Although both countries have made clear that they view a military option as a last resort,⁸ the dialogue would encompass an analysis of the consequences of possible scenarios for the emergence of a nuclear crisis involving Iran, the United States, or Israel, including the following:

- A preventive U.S., multilateral, or Israeli attack
- A surprise Iranian nuclear attack
- An Iranian nuclear dictate, for example, that Israel cease advancing in a winning situation, withdraw in defeat in a losing one, or simply cede territory

6. Ibid., p. 124.

7. E. Kam, “Curbing the Iranian Nuclear Threat: The Military Option,” Jaffee Center, *Strategic Assessment* 7, no. 3 (December 2004), pp. 62–65.

8. Ibid., p. 33.

- Escalation from a conventional confrontation between Israel and Iran, or more likely, between Israel, Syria, Hizballah, or other regional actors, in which Iran provides a nuclear umbrella⁹
- Covert deployment of Iranian nuclear capabilities, for example, in Lebanon or Syria, or their transfer to third-party, state or nonstate, actors (Hizballah, al-Qaeda)

- Regime change or domestic chaos leading to loss of control over the nuclear capability. One possibility is the apocalyptic scenario in which the Islamic regime, fearing imminent collapse or actually undergoing it, decides to “go with glory” and take Israel with it.¹⁰

9. Ibid., pp. 53–55.

10. Sokolski and Clawson, eds., *Getting Ready for a Nuclear-Ready Iran*, p. 233.

Conclusion

FROM THE PUBLIC RECORD, we cannot judge the extent to which the United States and Israel have conducted or are conducting a broad and in-depth dialogue on the critical questions raised in this study. Only one thing is abundantly clear: if ever a need existed for the closest possible bilateral consultation, if ever there was a test case of the strength of the U.S.-Israeli relationship and of the U.S. commitment to Israel's security, the Iranian nuclear program is it. On particularly sensitive issues, however, sovereign nations are loath to discuss openly their intentions and capabilities, even with their closest allies. This reluctance is particularly true in cases of asymmetric relations, where one side is

far more dependent than the other is, such as the highly lopsided U.S.-Israeli "special relationship."

In the absence of evidence, the preceding analysis is inherently speculative in nature. Nevertheless, to the extent that it does accurately reflect reality, serious obstacles exist to a true bilateral U.S.-Israeli dialogue on what is arguably the most important issue they have ever faced together. By the time the two countries overcome these obstacles, the risk exists that they will be too late to realize fully the benefits of joint consultation, both in terms of the means of preventing Iran from achieving an operational capability and of adopting joint measures for living with a nuclear Iran.

Appendix: Iran and Sanctions

INTERNATIONAL SANCTIONS, whether in the UN Security Council or in some other multilateral setting, could include a graduated ban on financial transactions and trade with Iran, akin to the unilateral trade embargo the United States has long imposed. An area of particular Iranian vulnerability would be a ban on the export of refined petroleum products (gasoline, automotive oils) to Iran, on which it is highly dependent: a huge exporter of crude oil, Iran lacks sufficient domestic refining capabilities and thus imports some 40 percent of its refined gasoline products.

If this ban proved insufficient, the U.S.-led coalition could begin limiting and even ban Iran's exports of crude oil. Though Iran could preempt by cutting off its oil exports and has large foreign exchange reserves, this action would be tantamount to cutting off its nose to spite its face, given its almost total dependence on them (85 percent of Iran's exports, 65 percent of the state budget). The far greater "stick" is thus in the hands of the West, even if the per gallon price of oil would rise significantly.

Iran is vulnerable to additional international sanctions as well. Its automotive industry, although domestically produced, is nonetheless highly dependent on imports of foreign components and could be largely shut down in short order. Iran's internet-avid youth might rise in anger and exert pressure on the government were their access to the global net to be denied. Many other measures, as the United States has successfully demonstrated in recent months through pressure on international banks, remain to be applied.

Indeed, Saudi Arabia alone could have a potentially decisive impact on Iran, were it to increase its oil production substantially. This action would lead to a precipitous drop in the world price of oil and have severe ramifications for the Iranian economy. For obvious

reasons, the Saudis would not wish to do so, but they may find it preferable to the specter of a naval blockade or direct military action against Iran.

Russia is the key to sanctions in the UN Security Council. If Russia can be convinced to support effective sanctions in the council, it is hard to imagine that China will remain the solitary P-5 spoiler. For years, Russia has professed to view a nuclear Iran as a threat to its security and to oppose this eventuality. If taken as genuine, and there is no reason to doubt this—some Russian policies notwithstanding (such as construction of the Bushehr reactor and arms sales to Iran)—then a common basis does exist for an agreed approach in the Security Council. It would require a major—and therefore hard to achieve—change in the Bush administration's approach to issues of fundamental concern to Russia (e.g., NATO expansion, deployment of antimissile system in Europe, World Trade Organization accession), as well as joint U.S.-Israeli agreement to provide Russia with a significant role in the peace process.

Assuming, however, that Russia and China prove unwilling to support the severe sanctions that the Security Council would be required to adopt to engender the desired change in Iranian policy, the United States and Israel must be in a position to know what additional multilateral measures can be applied outside of the council. At present, some months more will still be required before the Security Council process plays itself out. The interim period should be devoted to initial implementation, together with all relevant allies and like-minded states, of these non-Security Council multilateral sanctions, which would be rapidly expanded. A U.S.-led coalition of the willing might include the NATO allies, Japan, other international players, and possibly some of the Arab states.

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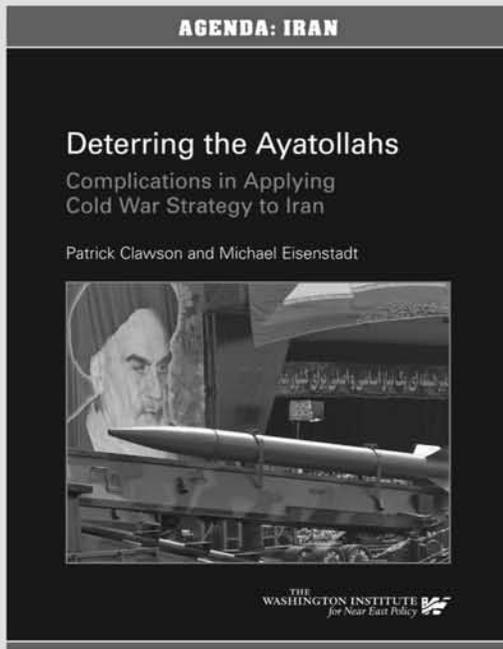
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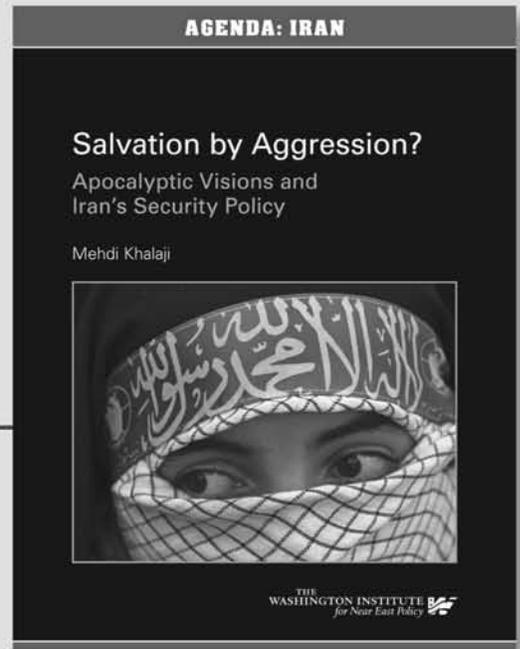
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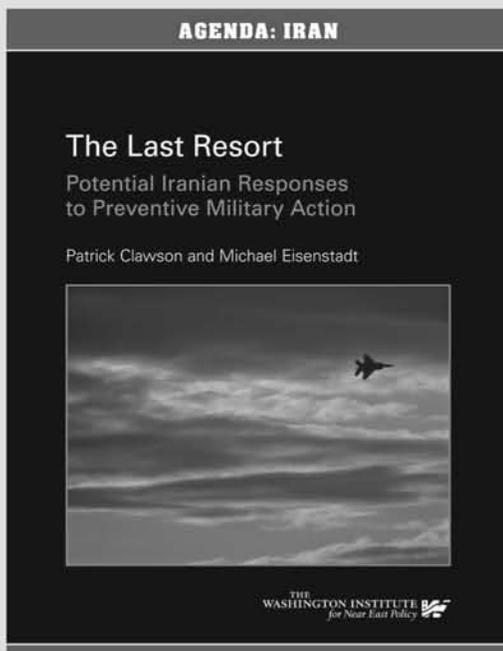
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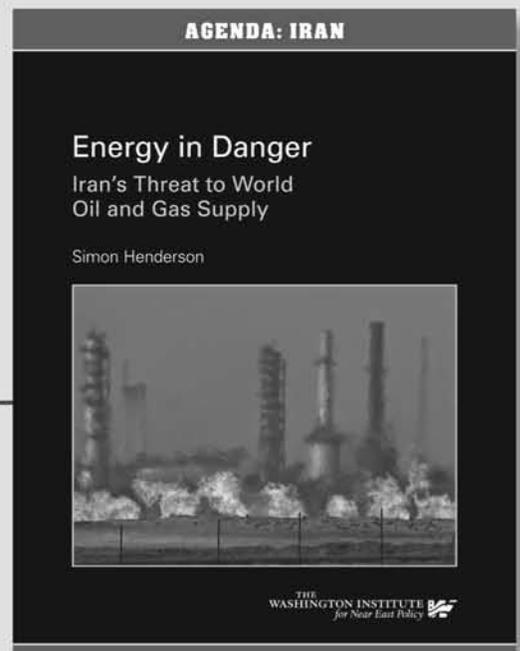
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