

## The Iranian Nuclear Threat and U.S. Policy (Part III)

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### In-Depth Reports

There were traditionally two Israeli schools of thought on Iranian proliferation. One viewed Iran as a major problem because of the nature of the regime that took power in the 1979 revolution, the line that the regime took in Lebanon opposing any negotiations with Israel, and its heavy involvement in terrorism worldwide. All this created the image of an extremely problematic adversary. But at the same time, there was a school of thought that retained a certain romantic view of Iran, believing that the collision course Iran and Israel seemed to be on was not inevitable. They felt that, in the long run, some commonalities between the two countries could be revived that existed before the revolution. The influence of this romantic legacy prevailed as recently as ten years ago, when the facts about Iran's march toward a strategic capability that could reach Israel became apparent. From that moment on, Israel's thoughts became focused.

Interestingly, Iran's nuclear development was not what gave serious impetus to this focus. Everyone has been watching Bushehr. But Israel began to notice that the Iranians were taking interest in missiles capable of reaching Israel. When Iran started to look into the No-Dong and later began developing the Shahab-3, the matter became very serious indeed. It was clear that the Iranians were pursuing the acquisition of delivery systems capable of reaching and penetrating Israel.

In the last few years, Israel has looked beyond its immediate Palestinian adversaries' I still refer to them as adversaries rather than partners -- and seen the same countries of concern as does the United States: Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Iran. Each of these countries has had the same attributes, including their search for nonconventional weapons, their retention of unpleasant regimes, and so forth. But if I were to rank the country that figures as the greatest threat to Israel among the four, it has always been Iran -- not Syria, which is actually closer and has a few hundred missiles capable of reaching Israel with nonconventional munitions; not Libya, which is still interested in a nuclear program of its own; and not Iraq, even when it was celebrated as being the most immediate threat to the region or to Israel.

Israel considers Iran to be its greatest threat for the same reasons that the United States considers the prospect of a nuclear Iran to be threatening. We all know the ramifications: It could unleash proliferation in the Middle East. It could destabilize the Persian Gulf region. It could undermine future negotiating processes between Israel and her neighbors.

At present, Israeli threat perception remains acute. A few years ago, when this problem came to the fore, senior Israeli military figures and others made a series of inflammatory declarations hinting at all kinds of things. Those statements have ceased. But Israel has nevertheless taken clear actions indicating the seriousness with which it views the problem. The acquisition of the F-15I fighter-bomber aircraft, which is capable of reaching Iran, is one such action, and it may not be the only one. Israeli silence does not indicate apathy or lack of response.

As Israel views Iran's accelerated march to acquire strategic capability, the prospects seem very ominous indeed. It has been noted here that our eyes should be focused not necessarily on the prospect of Iran testing or acquiring a bomb but instead on Tehran's intensive effort to acquire a self-sufficient, independent fuelcycle capability. That is

very much the focus of Israel's current concern; it is necessary to arrest this process, not to make it more transparent. Transparency may be a means to a certain end, but it is not an end in itself.

The problem is extremely complex. Israel faces serious dilemmas about the appropriate mix of policies on this issue. In the abstract, Israeli policy options are not unlike those that The Washington Institute's Patrick Clawson has proposed for the United States. Dr. Clawson has rightly identified five: encouraging regime change in Iran, engaging in international diplomacy and multilateral efforts, striking a grand deal with Iran, going for military prevention or some other form of coercion, and adopting a posture of deterrence.

In the abstract, Israel has a similar menu of options but varying ability to carry them out. For example, the possibility of a deal may still be entertained by some of those old Israeli romanticists, but it is not realistic because Israel does not have much to offer. This is more an international than an Israeli option.

Regime change is an interesting alternative. Unilaterally, Israel can do very little, although some believe it can lend a hand to certain processes ongoing in Iran. But regime change is slow by nature, imprecise, and does not automatically lead to the kind of results desired. Viewed broadly, regime change by itself has no direct bearing on the issue of most concern: the completion of an independent fuel-cycle capability, which, according to some Israeli assessments, Iran could accomplish as early as 2004.

That takes us to the larger vistas of multilateral diplomacy -- whether you call it coercive diplomacy or international pressure. This is the area in which Israel is now concentrating, a category rich in possibilities.

Israel also clearly has, in the abstract, the military option. We may not be able to terminate Iran's strategic threat, but we can inflict serious damage. Certainly, the United States also has such capabilities.

Finally, there is the deterrence option. Deterrence is not necessarily just the option of last resort for Israel. Some suggest that Israel should hope for the best in the multilateral field but prepare for the worst with deterrence in case Iran accomplishes its objectives. But there is another variation on that theme: taking certain steps before Iran acquires a nuclear bomb. For example, deterring Iran from either reaching fuel-cycle self-sufficiency or assembling a nuclear weapon. Deterrence has many meanings.

This is the range of options that Israel possesses. In the absence of an explicit Israeli declaration about its Iran policy, all I can do is characterize some of my own observations about the course Israel has taken thus far. In the first place, Israel keeps a very low profile on this issue. That should not be misread: it certainly does not indicate a lack of concern. Israel's atypically low profile in this case serves an interest.

Second, in approaching its options, Israel may be taking a sequential policy, letting things run their course and examining them one after the other. Israel's options are not mutually exclusive; they are often mutually dependent. Some options can be described as default options while others are intertwined; time is required for all these processes to take their course.

All eyes are now set on the possible movement of the issue from the International Atomic Energy Agency to the United Nations Security Council. What the Security Council does will be of great significance. Dr. Clawson has listed some interesting options emphasizing disincentives, punitive action, and pressure rather than incentives. Clearly, if it comes to that, the package has to be weighted in such a manner as to suit the Iranian character.

Israel would be involved multilaterally, at all levels with all governments concerned in the hope that the Security Council package, if adopted, would be effective. Indeed, the results obtained from these activities would be the test according to which Israel would evaluate its own options. It is important to note that, while Israel has a high degree of consultation with the United States, that degree of consultation also exists with others. For example, the European letter alluded to earlier was not sent without Israeli knowledge.

Currently, there is a sense of urgency in Israel. Dr. Albright, in an article, referred to a worst-case scenario whereby Iran could acquire nuclear weapons by the end of 2005. In Israel we believe that Iran's fuel-cycle capabilities may mature even earlier, by 2004. The situation is dynamic, but clearly it is a race against time. While all regard the Iranian issue as serious, the sense of gravity is more intensely felt in Israel, if only due to proximity.

I cannot tell you which of us is more politically determined to take action of any kind, the United States or Israel. President George W. Bush has said that he would not let Iran become nuclearized. But exactly a year ago, here in this very room, the current Israeli minister of defense, Shaul Mofaz, uttered a similar phrase on behalf of Israel. He said that Israel could not afford a nuclear Iran. It was nicely stated. But how much political will and determination there is behind these statements has yet to be seen.

Should Iran continue its march toward strategic nuclear capability, Israel's response will be based on the extent to which it has been able to slow that capability down, delay it, or bring about a complete reversal. These are trying times. I believe that next year and the year after may be years of momentous decision.

Read remarks by the other participants on this panel: [David Albright, \(templateC07.php?CID=208\)](#) [Farideh Farhi, \(templateC07.php?CID=209\)](#) and [Michael Eisenstadt \(templateC07.php?CID=211\)](#) ❖

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