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Why Israel Is Obsessed with an Iranian Bomb

By Maysam Behravesh , August 14, 2013 .



Perhaps more than any other state in the Middle East, Israel has historically shown a special sensitivity to its nemeses' efforts to acquire strategic capabilities that might change the regional balance of power. It has also demonstrated a unique willingness to take military action to curb such endeavors from coming to fruition.

Israeli air strikes against Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981 and Syria's Al-Kibar atomic facility in 2007 are but two stark instances of this pattern of behavior. There are even strong [speculations](#) that Tel Aviv seriously considered attacking Pakistan's Kahuta nuclear installation in the mid-1980s to thwart the South Asian nation's dash for the first "Islamic bomb." The plan was opposed by India, which feared grave consequences, and then eventually abandoned.

By the same token, since the public disclosure of Iran's nuclear program in August 2002, Israel has repeatedly threatened the use of force to curtail what it sees as a surreptitious attempt by a regional arch foe to build atomic weapons. (U.S. and Israeli intelligence agencies [concur](#) that there is no hard evidence Iran is actively pursuing a weapon, but both governments have [pressed](#) for greater transparency from Tehran about its present nuclear activities.

The war rhetoric was on full display on July 14, when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [warned](#) that Tehran was "edging up to the red line." He emphasized that Tel Aviv might not wait for the United States, but rather might take unilateral action to halt Iran's purported actions. "Our clocks are ticking at a different pace. We're closer than the United States. We're more vulnerable. And therefore, we'll have to address this question of how to stop Iran, perhaps before the United States does," he told a predominantly American audience on CBS News' [Face the Nation](#).

What makes this speech important is not its content but its timing. It was the first threat of coercive action pronounced by Israel's top leader against Iran since the election of [Hassan Rouhani](#), a moderate politician,

as its next president. Netanyahu's threat came at a time when the Islamic Republic is widely expected to abandon the reckless foreign policy conduct of the Ahmadinejad years and initiate a more balanced and responsible relationship with the outside world.

Yet Netanyahu described Rouhani as "a wolf in sheep's clothing"—in contrast to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whom he labeled "a wolf in wolf's clothing"—who would pursue a strategy of "smile and build a bomb." Netanyahu is thus indulging an unrelenting obsession with Iran's nuclear activities, regardless of whether a moderate or a hardliner assumes their stewardship.

Doomsday Logic

As the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and its top nuclear negotiator before Ahmadinejad assumed office, Rouhani and his team managed to build enough trust with Western powers to dissuade them from referring Iran's nuclear program to the United Nations Security Council. Though the final say over Iranian nuclear policy rests with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, the history of the last decade clearly shows that a moderate executive can make a big difference.

With this in mind, the question becomes: what does it take for Israel to rest assured about the Iranian nuclear program and stop obsessing over it? What is the logic—if any—of Israel's obsession?

Opening up this debate could offer insights into the minds of decision makers in Tel Aviv. After all, if improved prospects for a peaceful solution do not mitigate Israeli concerns, what will? One fears that even if the Iranians were to dismantle their nuclear initiative once and for all—as Libya did under Muammar Gaddafi in late 2003—Israel still might not be satisfied.

In truth, there is a strong logic behind Israel's obsession with Iran's nuclear venture. It emanates in large part from the similarity of the two countries' security situations and their histories of victimization. Both states are situated in an unsympathetic environment, surrounded by adversaries who would go a long way to precipitate their [demise](#). While Israel has felt menaced by its Arab neighbors ever since its establishment, Iran faces a large U.S. military presence to its east in Afghanistan and its west in Kuwait, and it was not so long ago that over 100,000 U.S. troops occupied neighboring Iraq. American and European naval fleets lurk in the Persian Gulf to Iran's south, and beyond them dwell the U.S.-backed Sunni monarchies that consider Shiite Iran their preeminent ideological foe.

Belying the [blustery rhetoric](#) about Iran's supposed preoccupation with martyrdom, Israeli leaders constantly imagine themselves in the shoes of their Iranian counterparts and invariably conclude that it is only rational for the Islamic Republic to acquire the bomb. Ehud Barak, a key Israeli figure and former prime minister, once famously [said](#), "If I were a Palestinian I would have joined a terrorist organization." That crude logic also characterizes how Israelis view Iran's atomic venture.

Put simply, if Tel Aviv had been in Tehran's place, it would have done everything within its means to go fully nuclear. And indeed, it did: Israel remains the only nuclear weapons state in the Middle East.

Living with *Realpolitik*

For better or worse, there is something to be said for this kind of *realpolitik* thinking. Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi would probably still be ruling Iraq and Libya, respectively, had they possessed an atomic device or two—a fact that is not lost on Israeli leaders when they contemplate their arch foe's alleged nuclear endeavors. From Israel's perspective, this logic applies regardless of whether a moderate or a hardliner assumes power in Iran, and even of whether a diplomatic resolution of the controversy is reached. (What Tel Aviv seems to neglect is that the use of brute force will not change this equation—to the contrary, it will only reinforce it.)

Regardless of Tehran's actual intentions, the realities of international politics suggest that Iran has as much reason to go nuclear as any nuclear power that preceded it. While Israeli leaders privately admit that a nuclear-armed Iran would not even dare think of an attack against their land—as this would amount to

sheer [suicide](#) for the clerical regime—they are permanently haunted by this simple logic. Apparently, nothing short of a powerless and pliant Iran under a different regime will pacify Israel.

None of this should be read as an attempt to legitimize any possible quest by the Islamic Republic for nuclear weapons. As some commentators have convincingly [contended](#), a nuclear deterrent would likely encourage Tehran to act more recklessly and irresponsibly in low-level and asymmetric conflicts, as the case of Pakistan today demonstrates. Some have also argued that the acquisition of the bomb would [deal a severe blow](#) to the cause of human rights in Iran. And finally, of course, nuclear weapons are killing instruments and as such deserve condemnation.

In other words, Iran's legitimate security concerns could prompt it to take measures that are regionally destabilizing and morally hazardous. But until the international community, and in particular the United States, genuinely addresses Tehran's well-grounded sense of insecurity—by establishing a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East and South Asia, for instance—nuclearization will continue to remain a compelling rational option for Iran.

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