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IRAN'S NUCLEAR THREAT IN THE BIDEN ERA: ISRAEL'S RESPONSE OPTIONS

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On June 16, 2023, the retiring head of the Israeli Defense Forces' Strategy Directorate, Brig. Gen. Oren Setter, provided the most recent Israeli assessment of the state of Iran's nuclear efforts: "We no longer have a safety distance of a year from breakthrough to going nuclear. Iran is two weeks from breakthrough, one step away from arriving at 90 percent enriched uranium, a sufficient amount for a bomb. In order to . . . transform the bomb into a weapon and complete its adaptation to a missile warhead for a missile—about two more years are needed."¹ Setter's remarks echo the assessment given by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, to the U.S. Congress on March 28, 2023, that at the current level and pace of its uranium enrichment efforts, "[f]rom the time of a national decision, Iran could produce enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon in approximately 10-15 days and it would only take several months to produce an actual nuclear weapon."²

Though there is no agreed definition of what constitutes a "nuclear threshold state," most nuclear experts would likely concur that any country meeting General Milley's

and General Setter's depictions of the current state and trajectory of Iran's nuclear program will have earned this unique status.

In encouraging and later celebrating former U.S. president Donald Trump's decision in 2018 to end America's adherence to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—the nuclear agreement reached in 2015 between the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the P5), Germany, and Iran—Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu bears at least some responsibility for the failure of the efforts to halt or limit Iran's nuclear program through diplomacy. This is especially the case given that the Trump administration abandoned the JCPOA without a realistic Plan B—that is, an alternative strategy to prevent Iran from renewing its nuclear efforts now that it was released even from the imperfect constraints associated with the JCPOA.³

Yet, Netanyahu's partial culpability cannot release Israel's current government, once again led by Netanyahu, from the need to address the various ramifications of Iran becoming



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a nuclear threshold state. Given that these implications involve challenges not only for Israel's national security but also for other important regional and global players, this Brief attempts to ascertain the possible regional and international consequences of Iran's newly acquired status; to explore Israel's options for dealing with these consequences; and to consider the risks and opportunities, for Israel and the broader region, that may be associated with these policy options.

IRAN AS A NUCLEAR THRESHOLD STATE

As a nuclear threshold state, Iran is currently at the lower end of the spectrum with a small quantity of fissile material, especially when compared with Japan's tons of separated plutonium. Yet, whereas Japan remains highly allergic to nuclear weapons even seventy-eight years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Iran's ultimate intention to militarize its nuclear capabilities was made clear by the weapons design program that it pursued and developed until 2003. This, in turn, raises a number of Israeli concerns about the implications of Iran's ability to enhance its threshold status through the accumulation of large quantities of weapons-grade uranium, enough for a small arsenal.

Israel's first concern is that Iran might swiftly cross the line between its new nuclear status, to become an "unannounced nuclear state"—that is, a country widely seen as having acquired deliverable nuclear weapons while refraining from declaring or otherwise clarifying that it has done so. This swift transition could result from the short time, measured from days to a few weeks, required for Iran to produce enough fissile material for bomb making and the somewhat longer but still relatively short time, ranging from months to two years, required to assemble a deliverable nuclear warhead.

Second, Israel would likely fear that it may fail to identify such a change in a timely manner, because in contrast to large-scale uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing, weaponizing does not require large and easily identifiable facilities. Hence, now that Iran is said to be able to acquire enough fissile material in a matter of weeks if not days, Israel cannot be confident that it would obtain the timely intelligence necessary to ascertain that Iran has taken the final step: assembling a nuclear bomb. In that case, Israel would need to "play it safe" by assuming that Iran has crossed the threshold and should be treated as a nuclear weapons state.

A third Israeli concern would be that Iran's new nuclear status would allow it, should it so choose, to quickly further upgrade its nuclear status to that of a declared nuclear state. Iran could do so in one of two ways: a) by issuing public yet general nuclear threats in the manner that Russian president Vladimir Putin has done in recent months in the context of the war in Ukraine; or b) by issuing a specific nuclear threat in response to a significant Israeli direct or indirect challenge to Iran's national security. Though there may be good reasons for Iran to refrain from crossing this second line, Israel would not be able to exclude the possibility that Tehran may decide to do so.

And even if the practical distinctions between a threshold status, an “unannounced nuclear capability,” and a declared nuclear state may not seem important, the psychological effects of these different postures on the Israelis’ sense of safety and security may be very different.

A fourth Israeli worry is that the three aforementioned concerns could lead to a Middle East nuclear arms race, as a number of the region’s states would likely feel compelled to react to Iran’s progress by developing nuclear programs of their own. In the past, senior Saudi leaders have already warned that they may feel compelled to take such a step, and more recently Saudi Arabia seems to have begun to move in that direction by conditioning an upgrading of its relations with Israel on a U.S. commitment to provide it with a full nuclear fuel cycle.

Additionally, Israel would be concerned that in the framework of the regional competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the latter’s new nuclear status, along with the perceived decline in U.S. standing in the region, would afford Iran greater clout in the Middle East at large. This development can already be seen in Riyadh’s decision, following talks mediated by China, to restore its diplomatic ties with Tehran; in the acceptance of Iran’s client, Bashar al-Assad of Syria, back into the Arab League (which was once considered “beyond the pale” by Saudi Arabia); and, finally, in the efforts of governments that until recently were seen as integral parts of the Saudi-led camp, like the UAE, to intensify their diplomatic communications with Tehran. How such intensification might affect the UAE’s ties with Israel in the framework of the Abraham Accords remains an open question.

Finally and on a different level, a sixth Israeli concern is that Iran’s new nuclear status might constrain the IDF from continuing its conventional military operations in Syria and Lebanon in the context of its “Campaign between Wars” strategy. Israel has been implementing this strategy since the early 2010s, in an attempt to counter Iran’s efforts both to expand and deepen its military presence in Syria and to supply Hezbollah in Lebanon with ever more sophisticated military technologies. Another important objective of these IDF activities is to stop Hezbollah’s efforts to broaden the Israeli-Lebanese front by establishing a military presence in the Golan Heights and in southern Syria.

Given the risks posed to Israel by Iran becoming a “nuclear threshold state,” what are Israel’s options for addressing these significant challenges? Three possibilities would need to be considered in this context: a) attempting to roll back Iran’s nuclear efforts, either by deploying diplomatic means or other non-kinetic preventive measures or by using kinetic means to destroy Iran’s nuclear facilities; b) attempting to come under a U.S. nuclear umbrella—an

“insurance policy” against Iranian nuclear threats to Israel’s survival; and c) sharpening and elevating Israel’s nuclear deterrence posture so as to dissuade Iran from utilizing its nuclear status against it. It should be noted that though very different, these options are not mutually exclusive, allowing Israel the possibility of pursuing some combination of these measures.

OPTION I: ATTEMPTS TO ROLL BACK IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

Israel may respond to Iran’s new nuclear threshold status by attempting to pull it back from that newly acquired status, by means of one or more of the following steps aimed at extending the time that it would take Iran to produce nuclear weapons: a) encouraging the Biden administration to rebuild an effective coalition that would compel Iran to return to negotiations, in much the same way that the Obama-produced coalition’s “biting sanctions” brought Iran to the table in 2013-15; b) upgrading sabotage and other physical measures against Iranian nuclear facilities and personnel; and/or c) destroying Iran’s nuclear facilities.

Reviving Diplomacy

Israel’s first option is to focus its diplomatic energy on helping to re-create a U.S.-led coalition that would apply severe sanctions on Tehran in an effort to compel it to pull back from its new threshold state. Unfortunately, however, given that in 2011-15, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu repeatedly argued that, even in combination with “biting sanctions,” diplomacy would not persuade Iran to reverse its nuclear ambitions, he would lack credibility if he even so much as tried to help create such a coalition today.

Indeed, under current regional and international conditions, even if Netanyahu did not suffer such a credibility deficit, it would be extremely difficult if not impossible to persuade the Biden administration that re-creating a coalition that could compel Iran to reverse its nuclear march is possible. The key to achieving such reversal in 2011-15 was the coalition’s success in denying Iran access to international commerce by, among other measures, suspending its participation in the international payments system (SWIFT). This near-total boycott enjoyed international legitimacy, having been enshrined in numerous U.N. Security Council resolutions. But those key resolutions could not have been passed had either Russia or China exercised their veto power in the Security Council at the time.

In the current global landscape, however, neither Russia nor China is likely to join U.S. efforts to compel Iran to roll back its nuclear program. Not only are these countries now engaged in a global big power competition with the

U.S., but for all practical purposes, America is currently engaged in a proxy war with Russia in Ukraine. And if that were not enough, in this war, Russia's dependence on Iran is increasing by the day, with the latter helping Russia escape its own isolation and with Iranian-produced drones contributing to Russia's execution of the war. In such a Eurasian geopolitical environment, the odds that Russia would refrain from vetoing new UN sanctions against Iran are nil.

Appreciating this constraint, the Biden administration appears to have given up compelling Iran to accept JCPOA-like limitations on its nuclear ambitions. Instead, by early 2023 it had launched efforts to reach understandings with Iran that would dissuade the latter from widening and/or deepening its threshold status.⁴ But these efforts, dubbed the "less for less" talks, are not aimed at pulling Iran back from its newly acquired threshold status but rather at creating an incentive structure that would dissuade Tehran from exceeding the current parameters of this status—by increasing further its stockpile of 60 percent enriched uranium, by enriching uranium to levels higher than 60 percent, or by designing and possibly assembling nuclear warheads—and possibly also from reconstructing its plutonium reprocessing facilities. Depending on the concessions that the U.S. might need to make to prevent such measures, from Israel's perspective these efforts, if successful, would presumably be viewed as preferable to an unconstrained Iranian nuclear program. But even under the best of circumstances, they will not restore even the imperfect JCPOA nuclear breakout times.

Enhanced Sabotage

A second possible Israeli response to Iran's new nuclear status would be to significantly intensify its sabotage operations and cyberattacks against the latter's nuclear facilities, as well as its assassinations of Iranian scientists and engineers. Even as he mostly avoided taking any credit for previous such Israeli operations, when the current head of the Israeli Mossad, David Barnea, began his term in December 2021, he issued an extraordinary statement, committing his organization to preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons: "Iran will not have nuclear weapons—not in the coming years, not ever. This is my personal commitment: This is the Mossad's commitment."⁵ Yet the extent to which these operations have actually significantly delayed Iran's nuclear efforts to date remains unclear.

Furthermore, regarding this option, Israel would need to consider the possibility that Iran would use enhanced Israeli sabotage efforts as justification for further expanding its nuclear program in an effort to reduce its vulnerability. Indeed, Iran already did so, when in April 2021 it began to

enrich uranium up to a level of 60 percent following the sabotage of its Natanz electrical system.

Destroying Iran's Facilities

Though Israeli rhetoric in recent months has returned to the possibility of an Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear installations, the conditions for such an operation are now worse than when Israel decided to launch such operations to abort Iraq's nuclear project in 1981, and against the North Korean-built nuclear reactor in Syria in 2007. Indeed, these conditions appear to be far worse than when Israeli leaders considered and debated such an operation in the mid-2010s.⁶

In both the Iraqi and Syrian cases, the operations were launched to destroy a single installation, the destruction of which was relatively simple compared with the complexities entailed in attempting to destroy the multiple-installation program in Iran today. Destroying such a program may require a multiple-sortie sustained campaign—a very demanding endeavor, especially given that the targets are located at far greater distances from Israel than was the case in Syria and Iraq.

In addition, though the risks of a possible adversary retaliation were taken seriously by Israel, especially in the 2007 Syrian case, two aspects of such possible retaliation make the current Iranian case materially different than was the case in either 1981 or 2007. First, Iran's retaliatory options are far greater, given that its close regional proxy, Hezbollah, has built a vast arsenal of Iranian-supplied rockets and missiles, stocked for precisely such a "judgment day."

Second, in addition to Israel being far more exposed to Iranian retaliation than was the case with respect to Iraq and Syria, Israel's most important ally, the United States, is even more exposed to such retaliation, given the very large deployments of U.S. servicemen and servicewomen in the Persian Gulf, who are at serious risk given their close proximity to Iran. Moreover, the odds of such possible retaliation may be significant, given that Tehran will likely view an Israeli strike as unlikely to have taken place without a "green light" from Washington. In sharp contrast, possible U.S. exposure to retaliation was not even seriously considered in the 1981 and 2007 cases.

These greater complexities and risks, and the need to respond to unforeseen events during a semi-sustained kinetic operation, would require very close coordination between U.S. and Israeli top leaders. Such coordination in turn would require these leaders to have developed close relations, based on at least a measure of mutual trust. This was clearly the case between Israeli prime minister Ehud

Olmert and U.S. president George W. Bush on the eve of Israel's 2007 strike in Syria. To date, however, there is no evidence that Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Biden have even begun to develop such a relationship. If anything, the opposite is the case. President Biden has positioned the U.S. as opposing the Netanyahu government with respect to its efforts to weaken the Israeli judiciary, its policies that the U.S. sees as undermining any hope of ever resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within a "two-state" framework, and its toleration of Israeli settlers' conduct that only further escalates and inflames the conflict.

Another different but important constraint that may now affect Israel's considerations of a kinetic strike against Iran's nuclear installations is the changes that the Middle East landscape has undergone in recent years. Most impactful of these changes is the decline in the relative role of geopolitics and the correspondingly increased role of geoeconomics in the region's affairs. Some ten years earlier, an Israeli operation destroying Iran's nuclear facilities would have won at least tacit applause from a number of Arab states—notably, Saudi Arabia. But more recently, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman seems to have learned his lessons from the mistakes he made during the height of his very risky hardball approach: the costly large-scale military intervention in Yemen, the failed campaigns to isolate and boycott Qatar and Bashar al-Assad's Syria, the kidnapping and attempted extortion of Lebanon's president Saad Hariri, and the murder of the Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

By 2023, led by the same king-in-waiting, Saudi Arabia had adopted a more risk-averse geoeconomic "softball" approach. It is dialing down the war in Yemen; it ended the boycott of Qatar; it accepted Syria back into the Arab fold; and it has restored its diplomatic ties with Iran. This Saudi about-face reflects the broader regional transformation referred to above: a change in emphasis from geopolitics to geoeconomics. Thus, the ties between Israel and the Abraham Accords states—the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco—have developed faster, more deeply, and more transactionally than Israel's relations with its historical peace partners, Egypt and Jordan. Even more dramatic was Lebanon's recent signing, clearly backed by Hezbollah, of an agreement with Israel, delineating the economic boundaries between the two countries and thereby allowing them to share and exploit some of the Mediterranean's natural gas reserves.

It is difficult to predict how the aforementioned dramatic changes would affect the reaction of Middle East states to an Israeli military operation designed to roll back Iran's nuclear efforts. Given that the geopolitical competition between the Iran-led and Saudi-led camps will not have been eliminated entirely, it is quite possible that Israel

would still be applauded in important Arab quarters for postponing the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran. This might especially be the case in Saudi Arabia, given the latter's seeming loss of faith in the U.S. as a guarantor of its security.

At the same time, however, in an increasingly economically driven region and given the demonstrated vulnerability of Saudi Arabia to drone and missile attacks, the kingdom might now attribute greater significance to stability, and so be more concerned about the unforeseen and unintended consequences that could result from any large-scale Israeli military operation. This is probably the most important lesson of its costly intervention in Yemen—the same lesson that Israel learned in Lebanon in 1982–2000. Whether or not this change in Saudi Arabia's approach might lead it to go so far as to close its airspace to Israeli aircraft flying to Iran remains at this point an open question.

Finally, the odds of an Israeli strike against Iran's nuclear facilities are bound to be affected by the dramatic developments currently engulfing Israel's domestic political scene—making for a very different internal environment than was the case when such a strike was last seriously debated in the mid-2010s. An important dimension of this political crisis is an unprecedented rupture in the civil-military relations that have characterized Israel since its establishment seventy-five years ago. For the first time ever, tens of thousands of IDF reservists—including, most recently, hundreds of the IAF's reserve combat pilots—are threatening to refuse to show up for service should their government continue with its efforts to alter the balance of power between the three branches of Israel's government at the expense of its judiciary. In this domestic political environment, the issue is not only whether these reservists will show up for service in order to carry out risky bombing missions, but even more so, whether the country's leaders can order such a strike in an environment that is bound to produce suspicions that the mission was launched in an attempt to quell the protests by producing a national "rally around the flag" effect.

OPTION II: SECURING A U.S. NUCLEAR UMBRELLA

The possible buttressing of Israeli security through a U.S.-Israel defense treaty has been debated more than once during Israel's seventy-five-year history. In most such cases the issue was raised in the context of possible positive breakthroughs in Arab-Israeli peacemaking, and the understanding that concluding such breakthroughs would require Israeli concessions entailing security risks that would need to be offset.

Invariably, Israelis were of the view that the contribution of such a treaty to Israeli security would be associated with considerable costs and constraints. An important downside would be the need to “clear” any Israeli military operation with the U.S., as any such action might escalate and possibly require a U.S. military intervention. This consideration, which was first raised in the 1950s with regard to the need to respond to Palestinian terrorism, is currently still relevant in the case of Israel’s Campaign between Wars in Syria and Lebanon.

Moreover, as U.S.-Israeli strategic cooperation increased exponentially in recent years, it became less clear what additional benefits Israel would derive from a formal defense treaty. This cooperation is already enshrined in an array of defense MOAs (Memorandum of Agreements) and MOUs (Memorandum of Understandings), in increased U.S. Security Assistance, and especially in U.S. funding of specific weapons systems production in Israel (such as the Arrow missile defense and the Iron Dome anti-rocket system), as well as in ever more frequent joint military exercises, now conducted in the framework of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM).

Given these realities, yet cognizant of the need to address the existential insecurities associated with a nuclear threshold Iran, Israel might seek not a defense treaty but, instead, an American nuclear guarantee. Such an umbrella might come in the form of a presidential declaration, endorsed by the U.S. Congress, to the effect that the U.S. is committed to responding to any Iranian nuclear attack on Israel as if it were an attack on the U.S. homeland. The status of such a unilateral statement would be similar to the U.S. bestowing upon certain states the status of Major Non-NATO Ally.

The very limited scenario in which such a security guarantee would be relevant—that is, against an Iranian nuclear attack—would have the advantage of not requiring Israel to obtain America’s approval of its Campaign between Wars strategy, let alone its permission for specific operations within this Campaign. Nor would it require that the U.S. and Israel necessarily be “on the same page” regarding the Palestinian issue. Instead, it would constitute an “insurance policy” against an ultimate threat.

What might be America’s motivation to provide such a declaration? It might agree to do so based on a judgment that lacking a feasible Option I (see above), if Israel is not provided with an existential security guarantee, it will most likely be driven to address Iran’s nuclear threshold status by seeking enhanced deterrence—most likely by changing its own nuclear posture to that of overt deterrence (see Option III below). The U.S. would have a strong interest in avoiding such a scenario in order to avert the likely regional proliferation ripple effect of two major strategic changes

that would then be taking place almost simultaneously: Iran becoming a nuclear threshold state and Israel adopting an overt deterrence posture—a step that it has avoided meticulously for decades.

In attempting to prevent such a regional ripple effect, albeit by providing Israel with a limited nuclear guarantee, the U.S. might be supported by a number of Arab states: in particular, Egypt and Jordan as well as the UAE and Bahrain. For these states, a U.S. nuclear “insurance policy” for Israel will likely be considered a less problematic policy option than for Israel to adopt an overt nuclear deterrence posture. Moreover, since for decades these states have not threatened Israel directly or indirectly, Israel would have no reason to oppose the U.S. granting them a similar, more limited security guarantee.

OPTION III: ENHANCING ISRAELI NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Once the Israeli public begins to grasp the significance of the change associated with Iran’s new nuclear threshold status, pressure to enhance Israel’s nuclear deterrence posture can be expected. With Iran continuing to be governed by leaders who seem determined to achieve Israel’s destruction, it is a safe bet that Israelis will press their own leaders to reduce, if not eliminate, whatever ambiguity still remains regarding Israel’s nuclear capabilities and intentions. The purpose of such a change would be to avoid any possibility that Iran might underestimate or otherwise miscalculate Israel’s purposes and determination.

Lacking a feasible strategy to pull Iran back from its newly acquired nuclear threshold status and without the U.S. providing Israel with a nuclear guarantee, Israeli leaders will be under pressure to enhance the deterrent effect of their country’s nuclear option. Such enhancement could take the form of a declared change in Israel’s national security strategy or the issuing of specific threats aimed at deterring specific challenges to Israeli security. Other forms of nonverbal announcement, such as the conduct of a nuclear test, might also be considered, especially but not only in response to an Iranian nuclear test.

Israel’s adoption of an overt deterrence posture would presumably be accompanied by reduced secrecy and sensitivity around the nuclear issue. This would allow Iran and Israel to communicate directly in reaction to unexpected developments and thus quickly resolve questions and ambiguities about each other’s behavior.

Reduced sensitivity and secrecy would also allow the socialization of relevant elites regarding both the realities of the nuclear era and, even more precisely, the limitations

that nuclear weapons impose on broader national policy. This, in turn, should reduce the odds that these elites—in Iran’s case, the IRGC and the clergy—would press for the pursuit of high-risk objectives.⁷

These important considerations notwithstanding, Israeli leaders would be ill advised to ignore the likely negative ramifications of such a change in Israel’s own nuclear status. Primarily, this concerns the danger that such a change in Israel’s posture would lead to accelerated nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Specifically, a number of the region’s states—including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and especially Egypt—who might prefer hedging in reaction to the change in Iran’s nuclear status may not be able to refrain from accelerating their own pursuit of nuclear capabilities once the change in Iran’s nuclear status is followed by at least as dramatic a change in Israel’s posture.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Iran’s newly acquired status as a nuclear threshold state is a potential game-changer in the Middle East. Coupled with other important developments in the global landscape—especially the increasingly salient great power competition between the U.S. and China; the war in Ukraine; and the growing perception, however unjustified, that the U.S. is retreating, and has become an unreliable partner in the Middle East—Iran’s new nuclear status is elevating its relative regional and global standing. It is hardly surprising that under such circumstances, even states that have been allied with the U.S. over many decades are increasingly pressed to hedge between the U.S. and Iran. In this new environment, rigid coalitions and alliances may be increasingly seen as phenomena of the past.

Israeli leaders can ill afford to ignore the ramifications of Iran’s new nuclear status, and its implications for their country’s national security. Most likely they will consider responding with measures to enhance Israeli deterrence, either by obtaining a U.S. security guarantee or by upgrading Israel’s own nuclear posture to one of overt deterrence, thereby abandoning whatever ambiguity still surrounds Israel’s capabilities in this realm. No less important in this context would be efforts to establish ways and means of direct communication between Jerusalem and Tehran. Even if initially not designed to reduce the ideological differences between the two geostrategic adversaries, such measures would at least reduce the odds that the two rivals will miscalculate and become embroiled in unintended but deadly escalation.

ENDNOTES

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2. “Statement of General Mark A. Milley, USA,” Department of Defense Budget Hearing, March 28, 2023.
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7. For an earlier detailed discussion of these issues, see Shai Feldman, *Israeli Nuclear Deterrence: A Strategy for the 1980s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

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