



AN ISRAELI VIEW OF THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR CHALLENGE

by Efraim Inbar

My thinking on Iran is more or less mainstream thinking in Israel, what many Israelis within the defense and foreign policy establishments feel, even if they say it in a more diplomatic way.

Today's Iran is multi-layered. It is an imperial power, just as Persia was once an imperial power toward the Middle East and other parts of the world. It is also a regional power, one of the largest states in the Middle East demographically (66 million people), along with Turkey, Egypt, and Israel. Iran has long had aspirations to lead the region, not just under the current regime.

The current regime represents another, Islamic layer in Iran's identity as a state. This layer has been very clear since the Islamic Revolution in 1979; Iran propagates a particular, very radical version of Islam, and has a jihadist agenda to spread this version of Islam everywhere—not only to Palestine but also to Andalusia (Spain of today), once the domain of the Islamic empire. To put today's Iran in strategic terms, I would use Yehezkel Dror's category of crazy states, which means that it a state that has far-reaching goals, much beyond its border, it is revisionist, it has a great commitment to achieve those goals, it is even willing to pay a heavy price domestically in order to achieve its goals, and it has a quite unconventional style, which one sees, for example, in how Ahmadinejad speaks about Israel. This is quite unusual in today's international discourse.

Why does Iran want nuclear weapons? First, as an insurance policy for the regime, which fully understands that it is more difficult to destabilize a country armed with nuclear weapons. Outsiders do not know what kind of people will get their hands on the weapons in case of an external intervention designed to destabilize the regime—witness what is happening nowadays in Pakistan. The U.S. administration accepted Musharraf the dictator; we did not want anyone to mess with nuclear weapons. Moreover, a nuclear weapon is in Iran's view a weapon able to deter an American invasion. As a member of the "Axis of Evil," they observe that the U.S. preferred to attack Iraq, which did not have nuclear weapons at that time, rather than go after North Korea, which had a much more advanced program.

Tehran also views the nuclear weapon as a way to achieve regional hegemony in a way similar to how the French looked upon it. It signifies a certain status in the region. They believe that their past entitles them to have a nuclear bomb and to put them in the same rank as the large, important powers of the world.

Finally, Iran's nuclear program is also designed to try to block Western influence in the region. Iranians have a very ambivalent attitude toward the West. On the one hand, they see it as a dying, decadent civilization, but at the same time they are very much afraid of the corrupting influence of Western culture and morals.

The Iranians' nuclear strategy is simple: it's to talk and build. They are ready to talk. The bazaars of Tehran offer good guidance in how to bargain with the West, and the gullible West has been ready to talk to Iranians already for 15 years, and we all know the result of the talk and diplomacy. It's basically a North Korean model; North Korea adopted the same strategy and was successful. Tehran is ready to talk to the Europeans, the International Agency on Atomic Energy, but its goal is to gain time. It wants to bring about a *fait accompli* and present the world with an Iranian bomb.

An Iranian nuclear bomb would be very dangerous. A nuclear Iran will be a clear threat to anyone in the radius of its range—they now have a missile with a range exceeding 2000-2500 km, within which is the whole Middle East, Eastern Europe, India, Pakistan, even part of China. It is a real threat to a very large area.

At the systemic level, Iran challenges American dominance in world affairs. Seeing America as the enemy, Iran allies itself with people like Hugo Chavez of Venezuela. It is in the company of North Korea. An Iranian nuclear bomb will be a poke in America's eye. It will be very dangerous to the NPT regime, which to its credit has to some extent stabilized many regions of the world and been successful at preventing nuclear proliferation. An Iranian nuclear bomb, like the North Korean nuclear explosion, will be an additional blow to this type of arms control diplomacy.

Nuclear weapons will give Iran tremendous influence over the energy sector of the world economy. Not only is Iran situated along the Gulf, but it also is located along the Caspian Sea. We can speak about an energy ellipse which encompasses the Caspian Basin and the Gulf area that includes some 70-80 percent of the world's oil reserves. Nuclear weapons will give them great influence over the countries in that region and a much greater voice in the area of energy. As long as the world consumes oil and gas, as it will have to for some time to come, I don't think it's a good idea to give the Iranians even a larger voice in that sector.

A nuclear Iran will also embolden all radicals, Islamists as well as others, and allow them to feel that they have a nuclear umbrella, a strong country they can rely upon that plays an important role in world affairs.

At the regional level, nuclear weapons will greatly strengthen the regime. Few attempts have been made to destabilize this regime, and after Iran becomes nuclear there will be even less. We will see regional hegemony, many countries around Iran will bandwagon—they'll get closer to Iran rather than ally against it. We see already a cozier relationship between Egypt and Iran, the Gulf states trying to get closer to Iran, because they're afraid that if they ally against Iran, they will pay a heavy price. The alliance of Sunnis against Shiites exists more on paper. We don't really see much action in the Middle East of the Sunnis allying against the Shiite threat coming from Iran.

Indeed, nuclear weapons will help Iran export its Islamic revolution, particularly to the Shiites in the Gulf--Bahrain and Iraq. Of course, Iran already has great influence in southern Iraq, and it will gain influence in Saudi Arabia, where most of the oil is in the northeastern province, which is populated by Shiites.

A nuclear Iran will strengthen all its regional radical allies, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine, who will feel much more secure with a strong patron.

Another important repercussion of a nuclear Iran concerns Turkey, which is now undergoing an identity crisis. We see in recent years that a more Islamic party is gaining power, and there is a real struggle over the country's future identity over to what extent the Islamic dimension will be part of modern Turkey. In the past we've seen the Iranians attempt to help terrorist organizations against Turkey, because Turkey is anathema to Iran. Secular Turkey is an alternative model for the Muslim world. While Tehran espouses "Islam is the solution," the Turks have a different view on how the Muslim world should modernize. Of course the ayatollahs think their model should be emulated, and after the nuclearization of Iran we may see greater attempts on part of Iran to destabilize Turkey, which is a very important country. If Turkey fell under Islamic rule, it would be very bad news to the West. Turkey is playing a difficult game nowadays with this type of government, but it is definitely in danger should Iran become nuclear.

Another area where the West will lose is Central Asia. Since gaining independence after the end of the cold war, most of the new republics adopted some kind of pro-Western orientation, which was strengthened after 9/11 and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. A nuclear Iran will put an end to this orientation. The countries in Central Asia will either bandwagon, becoming closer to Iran, or alternatively, try to find some nuclear umbrella in powers which are much closer to the region--Russia and China. A nuclear Iran could well bring about the elimination of Western influence in Central Asia. The West will lose the Great Game.

A nuclear Iran would also affect the subcontinent. The Iranians are very close to India, which is just 300 km away. It will have a domino effect on the precarious Indian-Pakistani nuclear balance. Pakistan, which borders Iran, will have to adjust its nuclear posture to a nuclear Iran. Whatever it does will influence India. This is the basic security dilemma we teach in International Relations courses. So we may see a negative influence on the India-Pakistan nuclear balance, which could reverberate even to China, and we shouldn't forget that India and Pakistan were close to a nuclear exchange during the Kargil war.

A nuclear Iran may not hesitate to transfer nuclear technology to other bad guys in the region. It's not likely, but we may even see the transfer of nuclear weapons to terrorists or radical states. The danger of nuclear bombs falling in the hands of extremists if chaos comes to Iran is obviously something we have to think about.

The most important repercussion of a nuclear Iran is that it would heighten threat perception in the Middle East. In contrast to other parts of the world, in the Middle East, threat perceptions are very high. It's not only the Israelis who are concerned about security, Jordanians are afraid of the Syrians and Iraqis, the Syrians are afraid of the Turks and Israelis, and the Saudis are afraid of everybody. A nuclear Iran will only heighten those threat perceptions and bring about nuclear proliferation in this region. We see already the first steps of many countries trying to gain some nuclear technology. Turkey has renewed its civilian nuclear program, which uses the same technology as nuclear weapons. Egypt is doing the same. We cannot be sure that the Pakistanis will not supply weapons to the Saudis, who have subsidized part of their nuclear program.

Nuclear proliferation in the Middle East is a nightmare, because a nuclear Middle East cannot be stable. It is very dangerous to believe that the type of nuclear stability that existed between the Soviet Union and United States can be easily emulated in the Middle East. Americans like Kenneth Waltz produce theories that the more weapons, the better, that spreading nuclear weapons is bringing about stability because leaders are afraid of conflicts escalating. I doubt this. If the countries in the Middle East have nuclear weapons, there's a greater chance than ever before they will use them.

Of course, there is no extended deterrence. I don't think the Arabs believe that an American nuclear umbrella is effective, for

the same reason the French didn't believe that a U.S. umbrella would be effective—namely that Americans would not risk Washington to save Paris. The same type of rationale would be adopted by the Middle East elite, who have seen Ottomans coming and going, French, British, and I think they also see Americans coming and going and don't know exactly how the Americans would play out the Iraqi scenario. But many people in the Middle East believe the Americans have already decided on an exit strategy and are just groping for how to do it. So I don't think that an American promise to the Arab countries to defend them in the case of a nuclear attack will be trusted. And also there is no defense against nuclear weapons at this stage. Israel's Arrow system, which is attuned to intercept such ballistic missiles, can intercept only 80-90 percent, but if it comes to missiles armed with nuclear warheads, 90 percent is not good enough.

Therefore, there is a regional consensus that Iran must be stopped. There is wide agreement across the Middle East that a nuclear Iran is very bad news. So what can be done? Diplomacy has just about run its course. Actually, everyone in the world is on a different page. The world has already decided to go for sanctions. So far the sanctions were rather vegetarian, and diplomacy without sharper teeth will be ineffective.

Furthermore, I don't think economic sanctions alone would be effective, because Iranians are willing to pay a heavy price to get the bomb. The record is not encouraging. Cuba is still under sanctions, Saddam Hussein was under sanctions and he did not care whether the children in the streets of Baghdad or Basra had enough medicine, he just blamed it on the Americans. The same is true in Iran. If they had no refined oil and gas, the ayatollahs would reconcile to seeing their people ride donkeys rather than in cars.

As to regime change, don't hold your breath. We are talking about a police state. It's true that this type of state does not last forever, but the Iranian police state has been successful so far at staying in power even though it's not very well liked. There don't seem too many courageous Iranians fighting the regime within Iran. I see opposition here and in Los Angeles, but to be in opposition in Iran is a different story.

That leaves us with two options. One is a credible threat to act militarily, which I hoped could be effective in supporting the diplomacy, but since the NIE report I think the only thing we really have left is military action. A credible threat means someone that Iranians are afraid of. To great extent President Bush served this purpose before the NIE because he was viewed in the Middle East as a cowboy, ready to draw his gun. He has acted militarily in Afghanistan, in Iraq, why not Iran? An ultimatum by President Bush could have been useful in freezing the nuclear program, primarily the uranium enrichment component. This is no longer true. Perceptions are important. After the NIE, the Iranians are at ease, believing that they're off the hook. So what is really left is only military action to try to destroy parts of the program which will slow down the Iranian attempt and to gain time. Gaining time is an important goal of foreign policy, it's doable by the U.S. if it wants to. The U.S. is close in Iraq as well as in Afghanistan, it has tremendous military power.

If the U.S. doesn't do this, and I preempt the question already, the Israelis will have to think seriously about whether to do it on their own. Israel has done such a military feat in the past on Osirak in 1981. This is a different type of operation nowadays, it's much more complicated, but it can be done. In my view as a former paratrooper there is no such thing as an impregnable target. We just have to be ready to pay the price.

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