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ISRAEL'S ASSESSMENT OF THE IRANIAN THREAT

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In recent weeks, several events have led Israeli policymakers to upgrade their assessment of the Iranian threat. These developments include the capture of the ship *Karine-A* with a large load of Iranian weapons destined for the Palestinian Authority, and crude statements by Iranian leaders interpreted in Israel as threats by Iran to use force against Israel. The most blatant threat came from former President Ali Akhbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, who speculated that the Islamic world could wipe out Israel with a single nuclear weapon, whereas Israeli nuclear weapons could merely harm the Islamic world but not inflict mortal damage. Although Rafsanjani later tried to soften the impact of his statement, Israel saw it as a threat to use nuclear weapons against Israel.

These developments came against a background of basic trends that have prompted Israeli leaders for more than a decade to define Iran as a serious strategic – and for some, an existential – threat.

The first of these trends is ideological-religious. The Islamist regime in Iran takes a more extreme approach toward Israel than does any other Arab or Muslim regime. It denies Israel's elementary right to exist, sees it as a foreign body implanted by imperialism, and endorses the establishment of a Palestinian

state on the ruins of Israel, not at its side. This approach stems from the conviction that Israel controls Muslim lands and holy places and represses a sizable Muslim population. It is also grounded in the view that Israel is closely tied to the symbols of evil for the Islamic Republic: the United States and the Shah. Moreover, the regime perceives Israel as a growing security threat. In its view, Israel incites the United States against Iran, might itself launch air strikes against strategic targets in Iran, including the nuclear reactor in Busheir, and cooperates with the U.S. and Turkey in order to envelope Iran from the east and north.

The second dimension concerns Iran's military buildup. Since the early 1990s, Iran has been engaged in a general buildup of forces. Most worrisome for Israel are Iran's missile and nuclear programs. Iran is close to completing development of the Shihab-3, a ballistic missile with enough range to reach Israel, and it is working on a nuclear program that might produce a weapon within a decade. Iranian nuclear capability would fundamentally alter the balance of forces in the Middle East and pose a new type of strategic threat to Israel.

The third dimension refers to Iranian involvement in terrorism. For years, Iran has

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encouraged the use of terror against Israeli and Jewish targets, with Hizbullah serving as the primary tool. In the last two years, especially since the Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon, Iran has stepped up its military assistance to Hizbullah, especially through the supply of longer-range rockets capable of reaching deeper into northern Israel. Since the 1990s, Iran has also provided military support to Palestinian Islamist organizations, particularly Islamic Jihad but also, to a lesser extent, Hamas. By contrast, its relations with the PA in the 1990s were generally cool if not hostile. Iran strongly objected to the PLO's participation in the peace process with Israel, and it tried to sabotage the process, largely by encouraging terrorist attacks inside Israel.

The shipment of weapons to the PA on the Karine-A was therefore a new phenomenon. It is explained by the convergence of PA and Iranian interests. The PA was seeking a source for improved weaponry in its ongoing struggle with Israel. Iran, for its part, always wanted to deepen its involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to influence its course, especially since its capacity to strike through southern Lebanon was cramped by the IDF's withdrawal from the security zone. The end (at least temporarily) of the peace process and the "Aqsa Intifada" made the PA legitimate in Iranian eyes and allowed them to take a more active role in the armed conflict with Israel. Furthermore, supplying weapons to the PA, especially the longer-range rockets included in the Karine-A shipment, fitted well with Iran's policy of building an Arab capacity to strike at towns and villages inside Israel – from both Lebanon and the Palestinian-controlled territories. That capacity is aimed at deterring Israel from attacking Iran. But it could also undermine Israel's determination and persistence and ultimately force it to withdraw unilaterally from the Palestinian territories, just as it did from Lebanon.

The main problem with respect to the Iranian threat to Israel still lies in the future. If Iran manages to acquire a nuclear weapon, that will represent a grave threat, not only to Israel, but also to many Arab states and to American interests in the Middle East. No radical state in the region has yet succeeded in building a nuclear capability. If Iran breaks through that firewall, it would immediately produce tremendous tension and uncertainty and increase instability. Even if it were clear that Iran had no intention of using nuclear weapons, or threatening to use them (which is more likely), an Islamist regime in Tehran with nuclear capability would almost certainly act more aggressively on a variety of fronts: with respect to its neighbors, with respect to Israel, with respect to the United States, and in its oil policy. Such a development would also accelerate the nuclear arms race in the Middle East, because other central actors, especially Iraq but perhaps Egypt and Syria, as well, could not stand idly by.

Such possibilities also explain the change in American attitudes towards Iran in recent weeks. After the events of September 11, the US Administration generally refrained from openly implicating Iran in its war against terror, despite the fact that the U.S., itself, had consistently defined Iran as a major state sponsor of terrorism since 1984 and was perfectly aware of Iranian efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction. The Administration preferred to underplay all this, probably because it hoped that a dialogue would elicit more cooperative Iranian behavior. But President Bush's public denunciation of Iran in his State of the Union address and the conscious decision to include it in the "axis of evil" almost certainly mean that hopes for dialogue have been dashed and that the Administration will now weigh more forceful action in order to contain the Iranian threat.