

The Essence of the Iranian Threat

Ephraim Kam

In recent years, Israel and the entire world have come a long way in understanding the essence of the Iranian threat. At the same time, Iran has made great progress in acquiring nuclear capability. There is also agreement around the world that the Iranian threat is not limited to its neighboring states.

While Israel is not the only country threatened by Iran and especially by a nuclear Iran, for three reasons, all intertwined, it does have a special role at the forefront of the struggle against a nuclear Iran. First, Israel is the only country in the world that is threatened to be expunged off the map by the Iranian regime and by Iranian leaders, publicly and implicitly. There is no other such country. The second reason stems from the first one. Israel is also the only country that asks itself whether Iran will use nuclear weapons against it, if it acquires such weapons. In Bahrain, in France, in the United States, people are concerned by the Iranian threat but nobody asks that question. Third, Israel is the only country in the Middle East and one of the two only countries in the world that is contemplating the idea of using all means, including military means, in order to stop Iran on its way to nuclear armament.

Usually when the Iranian threat is discussed, the discussion is focused mainly on the nuclear threat. However, the Iranian threat is broader. The Iranians are involved in terrorism: for twenty-four consecutive years Iran has been defined by the US administration as the country most highly involved in terrorism. The Iranian threat also consists of subversive intentions towards the Gulf countries, Iraq, and Lebanon. In addition, there is also the conventional military component, and especially an Iranian

missile capability with ranges that are increasing – which today includes not only Israel, but also large parts of Europe and the Mediterranean. These are the implications of the Iranian threat today. It is still fairly limited, but if Iran becomes nuclear this would take on different proportions.

In Israel there is a consensus, or a near-consensus, that if Iran becomes nuclear it will pose a major threat to Israel because of two components that are intertwined. First of all, it will be the first time in Israel's history that an enemy state would hold a lethal weapon such as a nuclear weapon, and Iran's declarations seem to be a statement of intent. The combination of these two is a major threat. Yet sometimes you can live under such a threat – in Israel's distant past it lived in this manner. Hence the more critical question in my mind is whether Iran will use such weapons, i.e., will this existential threat materialize.

I think that Iran is a sensible and rational player that looks at the losses versus the benefits and at the price it will have to pay if it uses nuclear weapons. Thus if it plays as a rational actor, it will most likely not use nuclear weapons, not against Israel and not against any other country, for three reasons. The first reason is that I think Iran wants a nuclear weapon primarily as a weapon of deterrence. This is the basis of the Iranian nuclear program. The desire to destroy Israel exists, but not so much so that Iran will squander its judgment day weapons for something that is not critical to it.

The second reason is that Iran, like all other countries, believes that Israel has a large stockpile of nuclear weapons and also has a second strike retaliation capability. Therefore, Iran must take into account that if it uses nuclear weapons against Israel, Israel will use the same means against Iranian cities, and this would mean the death of millions of Iranians. Tehran has fourteen million people, so a bomb over Tehran would mean millions of deaths. Even a fundamentalist regime as radical as Iran's would not come to terms with that. And the third reason is American deterrence. The Iranians recognize America's commitment to Israel's security and to its existence. They need to take into account that if they use nuclear weapons against Israel, there will be American retaliation by the same token, especially if the American administration says this in no uncertain terms. Again, Iran has a population of millions and they are not willing to pay that price.

This is a logical analysis but there are two problems. Strategic estimates are sometimes wrong even when there is data to substantiate them. All the more so in the Iranian case, where we don't have any indications that could help us predict what would be its future nuclear policy. Indeed, we have no such indications because Iran denies any intent to acquire such weapons. The second reason is that we lack sufficient understanding of the decision making process in Iran. We don't know the weight of the fundamentalist-radical Islamic motivation, sometimes the messianic one, in this decision making process. Nobody can guarantee that one day Ahmadinejad or Khamanei won't get up in the morning and activate the nuclear switch, out of the recognition that Allah had told them to. Nobody can say it can't happen. While such a scenario has a low probability, the implication is that the government of Israel cannot allow the policy it adopts vis-à-vis Iran to be based on a mistaken estimate regarding the decision making process in Iran. The question is whether the government of Israel is willing to take that risk, when the results could be so dangerous.

Even if Iran will not use them, the fact that Iran will acquire nuclear weapons may have serious security implications for Israel and other countries in the region. Six main concerns may be identified. First, Iran with a nuclear weapon could be a more aggressive country vis-à-vis its neighbors, vis-à-vis the US presence in Iraq and the Gulf, and against Israel by encouraging Hizbollah to provoke Israel, and perhaps by influencing the oil prices. Second, a nuclear Iran may strengthen its status as the pillar of radical forces in the Middle East. This may lead to exerting pressure on the moderate countries in the region to undermine their relationship with the United States and Israel.

A third concern may be that nuclear weapons in the hands of Iran will create a real incentive for other countries to join the nuclear circle. Such states may be Egypt, Syria, and later on perhaps Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Turkey. Some countries, like Saudi Arabia, will wish to join the nuclear circle because they are threatened by Iran, and others, like Egypt, because they can't afford to stay outside of that cycle when Iran, in addition to Israel, has nuclear weapons. Iran may even be a disseminator of nuclear technology, especially as the global regime of nuclear weapons acquisition monitoring will be hit hard if all the efforts to stop Iran fail.

The fourth concern that we have to take into account is that perhaps Iran will give a nuclear umbrella to Syria, its main Arab ally, against Israel. It doesn't have to be a clear cut commitment on the part of Iran, but even a general statement will give Syria more maneuvering power because it will know that its partner in the region extends it a safety net of a nuclear weapon.

A fifth concern if Iran has nuclear weapons is that an atmosphere of panic or anxiety might be created in Israel. Moreover, the Israeli media or politicians may not be responsible enough and will ignite this fire. If that happens, it can influence immigration to Israel and emigration from Israel, as well as foreign economic investments in Israel. I think we have to think a priori about this possibility and try not to contribute to inciting such panic.

A final concern may arise from the fact that between Israel and Iran there is no direct and almost no indirect communication and no dialogue. Such lack of communication was not the situation in the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, and not even between Pakistan and India. They talked to each other, they shared information, and they created means and measures to mitigate some of the threats. All this does not exist in the relations between Israel and Iran. This state of affairs can be a source of instability and could lead to nuclear escalation stemming from misunderstanding, misperception, and miscalculation.