

Consciousness as Leverage: The Israeli Campaign regarding the Iranian Nuclear Program

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Background

Iran's nuclear program has constituted a central security issue for Israel over the past two decades. Against this backdrop, Israel has conducted a multifaceted drive to block it, in part through a complex cognitive campaign that extended from the summer of 2002 – when the Iranian nuclear program was revealed – to July 2015, when the agreement between Iran and the world powers on restricting the nuclear program was signed.

This article discusses the central characteristics of the cognitive campaign, which included four main components and motifs: the first and most basic, which was a constant for the entire period, was exposing and raising awareness of the dangers of the Iranian nuclear project; the second emphasized the other threats that the Iranian regime poses, chief among them its aggressive policy, which includes involvement in terrorism and extensive activity to develop long range missiles; the third component was the threat of a possible Israeli military attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, which was prominent as a central narrative mainly during the years 2010-2012; and the fourth component, which dominated from 2013, dealt with the negotiations between the world powers and Iran and with the nuclear deal that was reached between them. The struggle against the agreement has intensified in recent months against the backdrop of the United States' withdrawal from it, but that development is not addressed here due to the lack of sufficient perspective.

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The article focuses on a number of basic questions: what were Israel's main positions on the question of the Iranian nuclear program and, in this context, what were the main goals of the cognitive campaign? What tools did Israel make use of in the campaign? At which target audiences was it directed? And which of the narratives in the campaign were enduring and which changed over time? Finally, the article will attempt to assess the campaign's level of success, whether a connection can be found between the cognitive activities and the actual results, and what general conclusions can be drawn regarding long term cognitive campaigns.

Iran's Nuclear Program: Israeli Assessments, Interests, and Positions

The official Israeli positions regarding Iran's nuclear program remained consistent and stable throughout the campaign – that Iran's aim is to achieve an arsenal of nuclear weapons. All of the Iranian delays over the years were presented as tactical and temporary, and as resulting from deception, technical difficulties, or diplomatic considerations. According to the Israeli position, Iran has been deceiving the international community and concealing its capabilities and its true intentions. Moreover, Iran employs an aggressive strategy that includes the development of missiles, support for terrorist organizations, and intervention in neighboring countries.

The Israeli interests included, as a top priority, halting the nuclear program, and only afterwards restricting Iran's regional power and stopping its support for terrorist organizations. Unlike other threats, the Iranian nuclear capability is seen in Israel as an existential threat. According to the Israeli narrative, Iran's ambition to achieve military nuclear capability reflects its basic ideology and is part of the objective of destroying the State of Israel. The combination of these intentions and achievement of the capability to use nuclear weapons is seen by Israel as an intolerable potential danger. In addition, Israel fears that Iranian possession of nuclear weapons will lead to a regional nuclear arms race in which Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt might participate. Nuclear arms in the hands of Iran would also, in Israel's assessment, lead to the strengthening of Iran's regional standing and serve one of its main goals – situating itself as a hegemonic regional power.

Israel's actions in its struggle against Iran's nuclear program followed the Begin Doctrine, according to which it must prevent enemy states, such

as Iran, from acquiring nuclear weapons, even if this requires the use of military force. Israel's red line regarding Iran's nuclear efforts was to prevent it from enriching uranium at high levels or from producing plutonium, and Israel's overall ambition was to deprive Iran of its enrichment capabilities. The premise was that the production of fissile material is a critical component of the Iranian nuclear project.

The Cognitive Campaign

The main goal of the campaign was to cause the international community, and especially the United States, to take action to stop the Iranian nuclear program, as Israel cannot do so alone. The prevailing assumption was that the means at Israel's disposal, including a military attack, would not stop or eliminate the Iranian program, but only delay it, as confirmed by former Defense Minister Ehud Barak.² Basing the campaign on international assistance also stemmed from the norms that have taken shape in the international system against the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and from the American view that saw Iran as a threat to regional stability and to American interests. While the campaign involved expressing Israeli positions and assessments, this was intended not only for the purpose of public diplomacy, but also to explain the need for determined international action, and especially as leverage for putting international pressure on Iran.

Intelligence Assessments as a Basis of the Campaign

The cognitive campaign was based on professional assessments by the Israeli intelligence agencies. The political leadership relied on this information and on statements by senior intelligence officials, which were meant to lend the campaign validity and credibility. At the same time, the political leadership at times interpreted some of the data differently and emphasized aspects other than those highlighted by the intelligence community.³ For example,

2 For example, when Barak was asked in a press interview about the option of attacking Iran, he answered: "We are not deluding ourselves. Our goal is not to eliminate the Iranian nuclear program...if we succeed in delaying the program by a few years, there is a good chance that the regime will not survive...so the goal is to delay." See Ari Shavit, *Haaretz*, August 10, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2ViD1RZ> [in Hebrew].

3 On the intelligence work on the Iranian nuclear issue, see Sima Shine, "The Intelligence Challenges of the Iranian Nuclear Issue," in Shmuel Even and David Siman-Tov, *The*

occasionally, relatively moderate declarations by senior officials from the Israeli intelligence community were published⁴ that contradicted the leading narrative of the political leadership,⁵ including assessments that Iran had not yet decided whether to develop nuclear weapons.⁶ Some of the intelligence assessments were close to those of foreign intelligence officials on certain points. Despite these gaps, the messages of the political leadership and the military leadership in Israel regarding the danger of an Iranian military nuclear program and Iran's regional and terrorist activity usually concurred.

The Distribution Channels and Target Audiences of the Messages

The Israeli campaign in its entirety was led by Prime Ministers Ariel Sharon, Ehud Olmert, and Benjamin Netanyahu, as well as by their defense ministers, especially Ehud Barak. There were several reasons for it being led by the highest echelons: this is a strategic issue that Israel sees as being of supreme importance; the campaign was intended to influence other leaders in the international arena; and handling the issue required close relations with the US administration.

The campaign was directed at five main target audiences: the American administration, whose decisions with respect to the Iranian nuclear program are decisive; the Iranian regime, which Israel sought to deter; other world governments, in Europe and Asia, and specifically China and Russia; at American and world public opinion, hoping it would lead to further pressure on decision makers; and, finally, at the Israeli public, in order to recruit its support for the government's policy.

The two main channels of dissemination were state diplomacy and public diplomacy. For the latter, relatively little use was made of the official agencies, such as the Government Press Office. Even the IDF Spokesperson

Challenges of the Israeli Intelligence Community (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2017) [in Hebrew].

4 Yoav Zeitun, "Director of Military Intelligence: Calls in Iran to Reconsider the Nuclear Program," *Ynet*, March 14, 2013, <https://bit.ly/2VhMysu> [in Hebrew].

5 "Mossad, CIA Agree Iran Has Yet to Decide to Build Nuclear Weapon," *Haaretz*, March 18, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2SVQOBf> [in Hebrew].

6 "Director of Military Intelligence: 'Iran Has Not Yet Decided Whether to Develop Nuclear Weapons,'" *Walla News*, February 2, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2U5hpbq> [in Hebrew].

was barely involved in the campaign. A significant portion of the public messages were conveyed in speeches, declarations, interviews, and briefings by the political leadership for the media in Israel and worldwide. During the period under discussion, there was almost no use of social media for conveying these messages. Prime Minister Netanyahu's Facebook account was used for redistributing his statements and speeches, and in effect served as another medium of communication.⁷ Reports by the International Atomic Energy Agency and by research institutes were promoted and publicized, especially when they strengthened Israeli messages. The public diplomacy was intended for all of the target audiences, while the diplomatic efforts were aimed primarily at the level of decision makers within the American administration, and subsequently at other world leaders. In addition, information and messages were communicated to professionals, such as intelligence agents and academics.

Main Messages and Rhetoric

The majority of Israeli spokespeople described the Iranian nuclear project in the most severe terms. The agreed-upon definition from an early stage was that if Iran achieves nuclear capability, this could create an "existential threat" towards Israel.⁸ The impression was that Iran was relentlessly progressing towards developing nuclear weapons,⁹ and the intelligence assessments supported the political leadership's position that the sense of urgency on preventing this development should be emphasized, e.g., the statement attributed to the director of Military Intelligence, claiming that

7 Benjamin Netanyahu's Facebook account: <https://bit.ly/2VhMCIK>.

8 In an article published in *Yediot Ahronot* in February 1993 titled "The Great Danger," Netanyahu claimed that nuclear weapons in the hands of Iran would constitute an existential threat toward Israel. He wrote that Iran could achieve this in 1999, and the entire world should rally to stop it: <https://bit.ly/2Iwsz0j>; see also Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's speech at the US Congress: <https://bit.ly/2Veu1Nt>. Later statements by Netanyahu, this time as Prime Minister, continued to claim that nuclear weapons in the hands of Iran would threaten Israel's existence. See, for example, a television interview with Ilana Dayan on *Uvda* in November 2012: <https://bit.ly/2GIHpGo> [in Hebrew].

9 Maya Bengal, "Military Intelligence: Iran Stampeded toward Nuclear Weapons," *nrg*, September 21, 2008, <https://bit.ly/2GZ3P5N> [in Hebrew].

“the nuclear hourglass” is running out.¹⁰ According to the Israeli campaign, the time when the threat was liable to be realized was always “in three to five years.”¹¹

The rhetoric and the terms used by the media to describe Iran’s nuclear efforts were influenced by military slang. Iran was described as “stampeding” towards nuclear weapons,¹² as waiting for the right time “to storm towards the bomb,” as being liable to “enter the immunity zone,” or as already having reached “the point of no return.”¹³ As a result, Israel was described as having “a sword upon its neck” and as facing, each year anew, “a decisive year.”¹⁴ Starting in 2010, Israeli messages stated that Iran had already “crossed the technological threshold.”¹⁵ In order to intensify the sense of emergency and to pressure the Iranians, a seemingly dichotomous choice was publicly presented between two possibilities: “bomb or bombing.”¹⁶ A third possibility, employing economic pressure and the diplomatic path, did not usually receive

10 Anshel Pfeffer, “Director of Military Intelligence: The Nuclear Technology Clock in Iran has Almost Completed its Rotation,” *Haaretz*, December 14, 2009, <https://bit.ly/2SmXKlw> [in Hebrew].

11 See, for instance, statements by officials from the early 2000s onwards, e.g., Gad Lior, “Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer: ‘Within 4 Years Iran Will Threaten Israel with Nuclear Weapons,’” *Yediot Ahronot*, July 10, 2001 [in Hebrew]; Ronen Bergman, “Last Stop on the Way to the Bomb,” *Yediot Ahronot*, July 8, 2005 [in Hebrew]; Orly Azoulay, “Prime Minister Olmert: Within a Few Months, Iran Will Be Able to Put Together a Nuclear Bomb,” *Yediot Ahronot*, June 22, 2006 [in Hebrew].

12 For example, the Director of the Military Intelligence Directorate’s Research Department, Yossi Baidatz, in an overview for the government on September 21, 2008: Barak Ravid, “Iran Stampeding towards Nuclear Bomb,” *Haaretz*, September 22, 2008, <https://bit.ly/2T7wD2v> [in Hebrew].

13 Former Director of Military Intelligence Amos Yadlin in an interview with Ben Caspit: “Iran Passed the Point of No Return a Long Time Ago,” *nrg*, January 21, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2U4gnMW> [in Hebrew].

14 For example, the Director of Military Intelligence Aharon Ze’evi-Farkash claimed in August 2004 that “in 2005 it will become clear whether Iran will succeed in producing nuclear weapons,” and warned that “in 2005 we are going from the year of shock to the decisive year”: *Ynet*, August 30, 2004, <https://bit.ly/2SUyF6S>.

15 “Director of Military Intelligence to Government: Iran Has Crossed the Nuclear Threshold,” *Ynet*, March 8, 2009, <https://bit.ly/2BP8XWR> [in Hebrew].

16 Former Defense Minister Barak explained the dilemma well in an interview with Gidi Weitz: *Haaretz*, January 14, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2Ep2bsf> [in Hebrew].

credibility.¹⁷ Even after the strictest sanctions were imposed on Iran during the years 2011-2012, the Israeli leaders publicly doubted their ability to change the Iranian policy and stop Iran's nuclear program, and emphasized the need for a credible and explicit military threat.¹⁸

Over the years, relatively moderate statements met with criticism, in part because they undermined the narrative of an immediate Iranian threat. An example of this is the responses to the declaration by then-Mossad Director Meir Dagan, who predicted early in 2011 that Iran would not achieve nuclear weapons before 2015.¹⁹ Former National Security Advisor Giora Eiland, for example, countered that such statements are problematic, since they "may cause the world to relax" and reduce the pressure on Iran.²⁰

Differing Interpretations regarding "Nuclear Capability" and the Status of the "Nuclear Threshold"

Part of Israel's difficulty in stressing the severity of the Iranian nuclear threat stemmed from the conceptual and interpretation gap between it and the United States and European countries. The Israeli approach to assessing how long before Iran might develop nuclear weapons was based on the "worst case scenario," while the US and Europe referred to "the most likely timeframe." Furthermore, a central component of the Israeli assessment was the buildup of Iranian capabilities, with an emphasis on the ability to enrich uranium, while the US and the other world powers also related to the weapons development path and the intentions of the Iranian leadership, especially the question of whether a decision had already been made to renew efforts to develop nuclear weapons.²¹

17 Gideon Alon, "Director of Military Intelligence: After March 2006 there Will be No More Point in a Diplomatic Effort regarding the Iranian Nuclear Program," *Haaretz*, December 1, 2005 [in Hebrew].

18 Netanyahu also repeated this message in his speech to the UN in September 2013, and even warned that Israel was willing to take independent action against Iran. "Israel 'is Prepared to Act Alone against Iran,' Netanyahu Says," *The National*, October 1, 2013, <https://bit.ly/2ErAXBq>.

19 "Meir Dagan: Iran Will Not Attain a Nuclear Weapon until 2015," *Maariv*, January 6, 2011 [in Hebrew].

20 Sara Leibowitz-Dar, "Like Her Scream?" *Maariv*, January 14, 2011 [in Hebrew].

21 Yossi Melman, "Between Two Nuclear Clocks," *Haaretz*, March 19, 2009, <https://bit.ly/2STAL6O> [in Hebrew].

In November 2007, a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) was published, stating that Iran had stopped its project to produce nuclear weapons in 2003, and since then had not yet made a decision to renew it.²² This assessment was rejected by Israel, and at the time also angered US President George Bush, who later recalled in his memoirs that the NIE undermined the diplomatic efforts to create a unified front against Iran.²³ In November 2011, an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report confirmed the American intelligence estimate from 2007. The report noted that until 2003, a project to develop nuclear weapons existed in Iran, that Iran lied about it and hid information related to it, and that a few areas of nuclear research continued until 2009.²⁴ The IAEA's final report, which was published in 2015 and summarized the agency's efforts regarding the issue of possible military dimensions (PMD) of the Iranian nuclear program also came to the same conclusions.²⁵

The Non-Nuclear Iranian Threat

The cognitive campaign that Israel conducted focused on the Iranian nuclear threat, but in order to strengthen it and undermine Iran's standing, there was a constant effort to tarnish Iran's image and position it in the world's consciousness as "the regional source of evil." Among other things, these efforts emphasized the Iranian regime's ambition to destroy Israel, its aggressive behavior in the region, its intention to control the Middle East by creating a "Shiite crescent," and its worldwide terrorist activity. The Iranian missile program was highlighted as a central threat in two ways: both as

22 See the non-classified portion of the report: <https://bit.ly/2Dd0JXW>; Amir Oren, "American Intelligence: Iran Can Develop Nuclear Weapons but Has Not Yet Decided to Do So," *Haaretz*, February 3, 2010 [in Hebrew].

23 George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2010), pp. 418-19. Bush writes: "I do not know what motivated the intelligence agents to write such a report... maybe they were influenced by their failure in the Iraq War. In any case, from that moment I didn't have the practical option of putting a military option on the table... and our diplomacy was undermined."

24 "Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement and Relevant Provisions of Security Council Resolutions in the Islamic Republic of Iran," Board of Governors (GOV/2011/65), November 18, 2011, <https://bit.ly/1Nsifrx>.

25 "Final Assessment on Past and Present Outstanding Issues regarding Iran's Nuclear Program," Board of Governors (GOV/2015/68), December 15, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2w3Bpno>.

an inseparable part of its buildup of military nuclear capability and as the conventional offensive capability that in its own right threatens Israel, the Gulf States, and American bases in the region.

Much publicity was given to Iranian military maneuvers and to Iranian technological developments, as well as to missile test launches.²⁶ Later, Israeli leaders attempted to highlight Iran's intention to develop intercontinental missiles,²⁷ in order to emphasize its potential direct military threat towards European countries and the US.

An Israeli attempt was also made to strengthen the jihadist-terrorist image of Iran's leadership and to compare it to al-Qaeda and ISIL.²⁸ The Israeli political leadership presented the thesis that the extremist global Muslim "terrorism monster" in effect has two branches, similar in their goals and methods: one extremist Sunni (al-Qaeda and later ISIL) and the other extremist Shiite (Iran and Hezbollah).²⁹

Along with all these, emotional aspects and historical analogies were emphasized so as to establish the legitimacy of the Israeli sense of emergency and the need to halt Iran's nuclear program. Prime Minister Netanyahu and other Israeli spokespeople made considerable use of Holocaust analogies: the Iranian regime was compared to the Nazi regime;³⁰ Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) was compared to Adolf Hitler; the Iranian nuclear facilities were presented as analogous to the extermination camps in Poland;³¹ and later the nuclear deal between the world powers and Iran in 2015 was even compared to the Munich Agreement.³²

26 Ephraim Kam, *From Terrorism to Nuclear Bombs: The Significance of the Iranian Threat* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Publishing House, 2004) [in Hebrew].

27 Netanyahu's speech at the AIPAC convention, March 6, 2012, *Wikisource*, <https://bit.ly/2HZzVjV>.

28 Netanyahu: "ISIL Burns People and in Iran They Hang Them," *Channel 10 News*, February 4, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2GUXSqu>.

29 Public diplomacy video of the Prime Minister's Office, July 1, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2GGT9JK>.

30 Peter Hirschberg, "Netanyahu: The Year is 1936 and Iran is Germany," *Haaretz*, November 14, 2006 [in Hebrew].

31 For example, Aluf Benn, "Netanyahu Nearing War with Iran," *Haaretz*, March 6, 2012 [in Hebrew]. Shmuel Rosner, "Playing the Holocaust Card," *New York Times*, April 25, 2012.

32 "Ministry of Defense: The Nuclear Deal with Iran – Is Like the Munich Agreement

A poll conducted in April 2012 found that the vast majority of the Israeli public – 74 percent – believed that nuclear weapons in the hands of President Ahmadinejad could constitute an existential threat towards the State of Israel.³³ In August that year, it was found that 37 percent of the Israeli public believed that if Iran acquires nuclear weapons, a “second Holocaust” is indeed possible.³⁴ The cognitive campaign led Israeli spokespeople to disproportionately repeat certain elements of Iranian propaganda, and thus actually strengthened it.³⁵ For example, considerable emphasis was placed on Iranian statements regarding the ambition to destroy Israel, as well as on statements by senior Iranian officials that denied the Holocaust. The words and actions of President Ahmadinejad served the Israeli campaign well, as did pictures from the annual hate parades on Jerusalem Day and slogans from the conference on Holocaust denial that Iran organized.³⁶ As mentioned previously, the Israeli campaign identified the concept of a “nuclear Iran” with the motif of “destroying Israel.” The combination of this identification and the frequent warnings of the pending materialization of the threat increased the anxiety of the Israeli public. On the other hand, some senior Israeli officials claimed that the main goal of the Iranian nuclear project was to create deterrence and not necessarily to attack Israel.³⁷

The Option of a Military Attack on the Iranian Nuclear Facilities

Until 2009, when Benjamin Netanyahu returned to the position of Prime Minister, the public Israeli position was that the international community needs to lead the handling of the Iranian nuclear issue, that Israel will not conduct an independent attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities,³⁸ and that it must

with Nazi Germany,” *Ynet*, August 5, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2Iz9cLj> [in Hebrew].

33 Arutz Sheva poll, April 18, 2012.

34 *Maariv* poll, August 10, 2012.

35 See, for example, Ron Schleifer, *Psychological Warfare* (Tel Aviv: Maarachot, 2007).

36 Barak Ravid, “Ahmadinejad Denies the Holocaust in Order to Destroy Us,” *Maariv*, December 11, 2006, <https://bit.ly/2GDwLB3> [in Hebrew].

37 Former Defense Minister Ehud Barak made statements in this spirit on several occasions, for example in November 2011 in an interview with the Bloomberg network: “Barak: If I Were Iranian, I Would Probably Want Nuclear Weapons,” as reported in *Ynet* on November 17, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2E6bnjX> [in Hebrew].

38 Then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon made statements in this spirit, for example in

remain in the background on this issue. Although there were statements by senior Israeli officials during those years that Israel does not rule out an independent attack, these were not frequent and did not involve an organized campaign.³⁹

During George W. Bush's presidency (2001-2009), the US held that Israel must refrain from attacking the Iranian nuclear program on its own,⁴⁰ and added an American commitment to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.⁴¹ At the same time, vis-à-vis Iran's leadership, the Americans tried to maintain the image of a credible military option led by the US, which even received support from the British Prime Minister at the time, Tony Blair.⁴²

This was the background to the gradual rise during the years 2010-2013 of the Israeli attack option as a third component of the campaign. Dr. Daniel Sobelman discussed this aspect in a study published in the US in the summer of 2018.⁴³ Sobelman argued that Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Barak decided that the way to prompt the Obama administration to take determined action against Iran was to pose an ultimate threat in the form of an independent Israeli attack on the Iranian nuclear facilities. This step aimed to cause the US and its partners to impose "crippling" sanctions on Iran and to isolate it diplomatically, to deter it by presenting a credible military option, and to secure an unequivocal commitment by the US administration to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.⁴⁴

an interview with Fox News in May 2005: Nathan Guttman, "Sharon: Israel is Not Considering an Attack on Iran," *Walla News*, May 14, 2005 [in Hebrew].

39 See, for example, Amos Harel, "Shaul Mofaz: Israel Must Prepare to Defend Itself against the Iranian Nuclear Threat, with All This Entails," *Haaretz*, January 22, 2006 [in Hebrew].

40 "The Washington Files," *State Department Briefery*, January 17, 2006; "Cheney Warns of Iran Nuclear Threat," *Washington Post*, January 21, 2005.

41 Udi Evental, "The United States and the Iranian Nuclear Challenge: Inadequate Alternatives, Problematic Choices," *Strategic Assessment* 9, no. 1 (2006): 24-32, <https://bit.ly/2IVmvuO>.

42 Parisa Hafazi, "Blair Urges UN to Consider Action on Iran," *Reuters*, January 11, 2006.

43 Daniel Sobelman, "Restraining an Ally: Israel, the US and Iran Nuclear Program, 2011-2012," *Texas National Service Review* 1, no. 4 (August 2018), <https://bit.ly/2XtjTma>.

44 Ibid.

According to Sobelman's study, in order to convey the message of being prepared for a military strike, Israel took a variety of steps, including air force exercises,⁴⁵ media statements, leaks to the press, and discussions with senior American officials. Ehud Barak, Defense Minister at the time, claimed in a 2017 interview that the intention behind the public demonstration of attack capability was twofold: to intensify the pressure of the world powers on Iran and to prepare the ground and receive legitimacy for an attack, if and when a decision to launch it were to be made.⁴⁶

At the beginning of 2009, Barack Obama began his term as US President and continued the strong American opposition to an independent Israeli attack on Iran,⁴⁷ in part out of concerns that the United States would be drawn against its will into the military campaign. At the same time, Obama, from the start of his term, looked for an effective diplomatic path for handling the Iranian nuclear issue.⁴⁸ Early the following year, an assessment was published in the American media that Israel was serious in its intentions and preparations to attack the Iranian nuclear program, and that an independent Israeli attack should be taken into account.⁴⁹ According to Sobelman's study, starting at the end of 2011, many senior Obama administration officials believed that the Israeli government was seriously preparing for such an attack option. Administration staff even made public warnings to Israel not to do so.⁵⁰

45 Different Israeli spokespeople emphasized the air force exercises. For example, Yaakov Amidror was quoted as saying that the air force had already practiced flights with ranges of 2,000 km: Eli Leon, "Amidror: Israel Can Attack Iran Alone," *Israel Hayom*, November 18, 2013, <https://bit.ly/2IAmE1w> [in Hebrew].

46 Barak interview with Nahum Barnea: "Why We Didn't Bomb Iran," *Yediot Ahronot*, April 27, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2VaiIG0> [in Hebrew].

47 Ephraim Kam, "Military Action against Iran: The Iranian Perspective," *Strategic Assessment* 11, no. 2 (2008): 97-106, <https://bit.ly/2kUH2iT>.

48 Mark Landler, *Alter Egos: Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and the Twilight Struggle over American Power* (Ebury Publishing, 2016); David Ignatius, "The Omani 'Back Channel' and the Secrecy Surrounding the Nuclear Deal," Belfer Center, June 7, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2GGU2C4>.

49 See, for example, the detailed article by Jeffrey Goldberg after many meetings in Israel and concluding that an Israeli attack is inevitable and expected in the spring of 2011: Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Point of No Return," *The Atlantic*, September 2010, <https://bit.ly/2BP40NH>.

50 For example, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta in an interview with Fox News: "Panetta Warns Israel on Consequences of Iran Military Strike," *Fox News*, November

The public discourse on the issue of an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities peaked in the second half of 2012. At that time, windows of time were supposedly designated for carrying out the attack – first in the spring of 2012,⁵¹ then in the fall, before the US presidential elections.⁵² Decision makers in Israel briefed journalists for the purpose of sending alerts and messages, including to the Israeli public. An example of this is the article by the editor of the daily *Israel Hayom*, Amos Regev, on March 15, 2012, which was published the day after he had apparently spoken with Prime Minister Netanyahu.⁵³ In the newspaper's main article, under the headline, "Difficult, Daring, Possible," Regev outlined the reasoning for an Israeli military attack on Iran. The article was accompanied by two symbolic pictures: one of an Iranian enrichment facility and the other of Israeli Air Force planes flying above the gate of the Auschwitz extermination camp.⁵⁴ In the summer of 2012, *Haaretz* published a series of articles by journalist Ari Shavit that also dealt with this topic, titled "The Eastern Front." Shavit spoke, among others, with Defense Minister Ehud Barak (referring to him as "the decision maker"), who detailed the strategic reasoning behind attacking Iran.⁵⁵ The majority of the Israeli public supported the option of attacking Iran. A poll by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs taken in March 2012 found that 60 percent of the public believed that a military attack was the only way to stop Iran.⁵⁶

18, 2011, <https://fxn.ws/2XgyMYZ>.

51 Yitzhak Benhorin, "Panetta Believes that Israel Will Attack Iran by June 2012," *Ynet*, February 2, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2IzwUqL> [in Hebrew].

52 Ari Shavit, "The Decision Maker Warns: We Can't Trust the United States to Attack Iran in Time," *Haaretz*, August 10, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2ViD1RZ> [in Hebrew]. In this interview, Ehud Barak provided a detailed account of all the considerations in favor of an Israeli attack.

53 According to records of the dates of conversations between Netanyahu and Amos Regev, as relayed to the journalist Raviv Drucker: *HaAyin HaShevi'it* (*The Seventh Eye*) website, <https://bit.ly/2tA7yPp> [in Hebrew].

54 Amos Regev, "Difficult, Daring, Possible," *Israel Hayom*, March 15, 2012 [in Hebrew].

55 See the concluding article of the series by Shavit, which includes references to all of the interviews that he held: Ari Shavit, "Israel Facing the Dilemma of its Life," *Haaretz*, September 28, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2Iy4wp7> [in Hebrew].

56 Poll by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, conducted by Camil Fuchs, March 26, 2012: "Majority of Israeli Citizens Support Attacking Iran" [in Hebrew].

In his speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2012, Prime Minister Netanyahu painted a red line on a drawing of a bomb and warned against the continued enrichment of uranium to a high level by Iran, while emphasizing the need to stop the enrichment beyond 20 percent. According to IAEA reports from that period, Iran had not increased its stockpile of enriched uranium and had not gone beyond Netanyahu's "red line."

Towards the end of 2012, the military tension decreased; the threat of an Israeli attack on Iran was less frequently highlighted in the media. From that point on, sanctions took on a more central role in the discourse as an effective way to stop the Iranian nuclear program.⁵⁷

The public disagreement with the US administration surrounding the issue of attacking Iran fueled the mutual suspicion between Israel and the US and sometimes even led to accusations.⁵⁸ Historical narratives and examples were also recruited for the dispute: senior Obama administration officials recalled the bitter experience of the American entanglement in the Iraq War in 2003 – a war that erupted on the basis of a false intelligence assessment; in contrast, in Israel the analogy of the Begin Doctrine was used, along with the possibility of repeating the successful mission to destroy the Osirak reactor in Iraq in June 1981, while also hinting about the attack on the nuclear reactor in Syria in 2007.⁵⁹ Netanyahu continued to emphasize Israel's right and ability to attack independently. Thus, in an interview on the *Uvda* investigative television program in November 2012, he claimed that Israel can attack even without American approval, "just like Begin did in 1981," and that the Israeli political leadership alone would decide on this matter.⁶⁰

57 Amos Harel, "With the Coming of Autumn, Talks of Sanctions Return," *Haaretz*, October 7, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2tBqddo> [in Hebrew].

58 For example, the Israeli accusation (by "political sources") that the United States was distorting the intelligence assessments and claiming that Iran did not intend to create a bomb soon in order to deny Israel the legitimacy for a military attack. See, for example, an article from February 2012, in which "sources in Jerusalem" briefed a *Ynet* reporter before the Prime Minister traveled to a meeting with President Obama: Attila Somfalvi, "Sources in Jerusalem against the US: 'They Are Waging a Campaign to Prevent Us from Attacking,'" *Ynet*, February 27, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2tyuEpg> [in Hebrew].

59 Mike Herzog, "The Destruction of the Syrian Reactor – Another Look," *Haaretz*, April 29, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2HOr6FW> [in Hebrew].

60 *Uvda*, November 5, 2012, *Mako* website, <https://bit.ly/2GFN2Fu> [in Hebrew].

A central difference between the Israeli attacks on the nuclear reactors in 1981 in Iraq and in 2007 in Syria, and a possible attack on Iran, was that the preparations for an attack in Iraq and in Syria remained completely secret, while in the Iranian case a lively public discourse had developed. This unusual behavior led senior American commentators to doubt the credibility of the Israeli attack threat.⁶¹ In addition, there were reports of internal disagreements in Israel between the political leadership and the military leaders, some of whom opposed an attack. The most prominent among them was Mossad Director Meir Dagan, who, after completing his term, went so far as to sharply criticize the attack option, calling it “a stupid idea.”⁶²

The Campaign around the Negotiations Leading up to the Signing of the Nuclear Deal

From 2013, the Israeli cognitive campaign, led by Prime Minister Netanyahu, focused on its fourth stage – attempting to influence the negotiations that the US and the other world powers held with Iran. Most of this effort was aimed at the American administration, both directly and via Congress, but pressure was also applied on the other countries that participated in the negotiations, as well as on public opinion. Staunch Israeli opposition to the framework that was formulated in the negotiations was expressed even before the signing of the interim agreement with Iran in Geneva in November 2013, when it became clear that Iran would be permitted to retain some of its enrichment capabilities and that the agreement would be limited in time. Israel argued that the interim agreement was terrible and would enable Iran to later develop a large stockpile of nuclear weapons.⁶³ After the final agreement with Iran was signed in July 2015, Israel announced that it was not committed to it.⁶⁴

Several months earlier, in March 2015, Netanyahu delivered an unusual speech before the US Congress that was intended to pressure its members

61 Dan Perry and Josef Federman, “Just a Bluff? Fear Grows of Israeli Attack on Iran,” *AP*, February 5, 2012.

62 “Meir Dagan: Israeli Attack on Iran? Stupid Idea,” *Walla News*, May 7, 2011, <https://bit.ly/2Iz44Xu> [in Hebrew].

63 Yair Altman, “Netanyahu: Iran Has Received Written Approval to Violate UN Decisions,” *Walla News*, November 25, 2013, <https://bit.ly/2tAerLB> [in Hebrew].

64 Barak Ravid, “Netanyahu: After the Agreement, Israel Is Not Committed to the Deal,” *Haaretz*, July 14, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2NIRkCx> [in Hebrew].

and make it harder for the Obama administration to carry out the negotiations leading to the agreement taking shape with Iran.⁶⁵ In response, the President's National Security Advisor, Susan Rice, called Netanyahu's presentation "a speech that is destructive to relations between the two countries."⁶⁶ The more time that passed after the speech, the greater the gap became between Israel's demands and the Obama administration's positions regarding the Iranian nuclear issue.⁶⁷

The Netanyahu government's discord with the administration was at odds with the support that it enjoyed at home. After the signing of the agreement between the world powers and Iran, the Israel Democracy Institute's Peace Index poll, carried out in August 2015, found that the vast majority of the Israeli public (73 percent) was certain that Netanyahu was right when he described the nuclear deal as "an existential threat to Israel." An even larger majority (78 percent) believed that Iran would later violate its commitment to the agreement.⁶⁸

The Challenges of the Israeli Cognitive Campaign

The Israeli cognitive campaign took place in a complex situation: first, the Iranian case proved that a long term integrated effort is usually necessary in order to deny nuclear weapons to a country determined to acquire them. Furthermore, unlike the Syrian nuclear issue, the Iranian case forced Israel to cope with a severe and direct threat to its national security without being able to entirely prevent it on its own. The practical possibilities for creating pressure on Iran to stop its nuclear program were dependent on American and international involvement; these included diplomatic and economic pressure, American military deterrence (which in 2003 indeed led to the suspension of Iran's military nuclear project), close international supervision of Iran's nuclear facilities, the option of undermining the Iranian regime, utilizing the diplomatic path to reach an agreement, and the possibility of an Israeli

65 Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu at Congress: The Deal with Iran Is Terrible and Will Lead to War," *Haaretz*, March 3, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2SispR7> [in Hebrew].

66 In a television interview with Charlie Rose on February 25, 2015, an excerpt of which was broadcast on *Ynet*, <https://bit.ly/2Vg26Nf>.

67 Emily B. Landau and Shimon Stein, "Israel and the Nuclear Deal with Iran: Chronicle of a Failure Foretold?" *INSS Insight* No. 735, August 18, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2ku6WtG>.

68 Peace Index for August 2015, September 9, 2015, <https://bit.ly/2XkH6a0> [in Hebrew].

attack – which, even if successful, would have required American backing for Israel and supervision of the continued Iranian nuclear development.

In addition to these challenges, Israel had different assessments than the United States and other parties regarding the severity and urgency of the Iranian nuclear threat. Israel's position, especially since 2010, held that Iranian progress in the field of uranium enrichment demanded immediate action, while the Americans and Europeans believed that Iran was not yet developing nuclear weapons and that it was necessary to wait to evaluate the impact of the sanctions imposed on the regime. While there were similarities between the interests of the Israeli government and those of the Bush and Obama administrations regarding the issue – in particular, agreement on the objective of preventing Iran from acquiring military nuclear capability – there was also a dispute between the US and Israel regarding how best to address the problem and the stages to achieving the objective: Presidents Bush and Obama strongly opposed a military operation and wanted the administration to retain the independence to lead the handling of the issue, while an Israeli attack on Iran would have taken control of the situation away from them.

The Israeli challenge also grew because the American administration was busy at the same time with a host of other problems. These included the need to disentangle itself from the protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the desire to prevent another military conflict, the global economic crisis that broke out in 2008, and afterwards the impact of the Arab uprisings (Arab Spring) and the rise of the power of ISIL.

The gap between these positions intensified when it became clear that the Obama administration recognized Iran's right to maintain and develop its uranium enrichment capabilities, thus adopting a position similar to that of the other world powers.⁶⁹ This was in stark contrast to Israel's position, and even contradicted the traditional American position, which demanded the suspension of enrichment as a condition for any agreement.⁷⁰

69 Shimon Stein, "The European Union and the Iranian Nuclear Crisis," in *A Nuclear Iran: Confronting the Challenge on the International Arena*, eds. Tamar Malz-Ginzburg and Moty Cristal, Memorandum No. 103 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, May 2010) [in Hebrew].

70 Wendy Sherman, "How We Got the Iran Deal," *Foreign Affairs*, September 2018, <https://fam.ag/2EqksFS>.

As a rule, it is difficult to measure the impact of a cognitive campaign on the strategic decisions of the leaders of world powers and to isolate it from other variables. Indeed, this is the case here too. The Bush and Obama administrations acted according to their own developed worldviews, and the Israeli impact on them was limited, if it existed at all, to tactical aspects and not to the overall American strategy. During Bush's first term, the approach of his administration towards the struggle against the proliferation of unconventional weapons and the states that support terrorism was based on the use of force and on efforts to overthrow "rogue" regimes. This concept was at the center of American foreign strategy after the September 11, 2001 attacks, as pronounced in Bush's "axis of evil speech" in January 2002. The formulation of this concept, including the American commitment to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, occurred separately and unconnected to Israeli influence. It was also at the basis of the Bush administration decisions to go to war in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. While the Americans soon discovered that they had erred in their intelligence assessments regarding Iraq, the Bush administration's demonstration of power contributed greatly to the struggle against regional nuclear proliferation and led to the suspension of the AMAD project in Iran, to Libya's decision to give up its nuclear weapons program, and to stopping the activity of the Pakistani smuggling network under A. Q. Khan. As the Americans became more entangled in Iraq, the understanding deepened that the chances that the US would take military action against the Iranian nuclear program were dwindling. The publication of the US National Intelligence Estimate at the end of 2007 further constrained the administration, and added to the harsh public criticism of it following the Iraq war.

The Obama administration was interested in resolving the Iranian nuclear issue with a diplomatic agreement, as part of an ideological and political approach that was almost antithetical to that of the Bush administration – this, too, unconnected to the Israeli campaign. President Obama, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 for "his efforts to strengthen diplomacy," had already in June 2009 offered to negotiate with Iran in a speech that he delivered in Cairo, before Israel had changed the emphases of its cognitive campaign.⁷¹ The efforts to begin secret diplomatic relations between the US

71 "The Full Speech of US President Barack Obama in Cairo: You Have the Ability to

administration and Iran continued from then almost uninterrupted.⁷² In the final analysis, the Obama administration succeeded in its view in completely implementing its policy towards Iran: it brought on board the players in the international arena in a joint effort, reached an agreement with Iran and stopped its nuclear program for a certain time, and also prevented an Israeli attack and a large scale military conflict in the region.

We can assume that Israel did indeed assist in raising public awareness of the Iranian nuclear danger and provided important information and assessments on this topic. The significant and effective part of the Israeli campaign was the threat of an attack, which was prominent in the international discourse and influenced the application of pressure on Iran. The possibility of an Israeli attack was discussed at length in the American and international press starting from 2010, and was viewed as a serious and credible threat.⁷³ This strengthened the sense of urgency in Washington regarding the need to address the Iranian nuclear issue and create an effective system of pressure on Iran. According to then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, figures in the administration believed the Israeli determination to take military action, especially in light of the attacks that Israel had carried out in the past on the reactors in Iraq and Syria. Others reckoned that the Israeli campaign pushed the administration to take action, and that it brought forward by a year the implementation of the planned system of international pressures on Iran.

Israel's attack threat does seem to have increased the motivation of the Obama administration to speed up the diplomatic efforts and reach an agreement with Iran.⁷⁴ Indeed, in 2012, secret, back channel talks began in Oman between the US and Iran, excluding Israel. The understandings reached in this channel were a basis for the open negotiations and the nuclear deal

Create a New World," *Haaretz*, June 5, 2009, <https://bit.ly/2BSOfVT> [in Hebrew].

72 Details on this can be found in the *Boston Globe*'s investigation that details the secret talks between the US and Iran via Oman in 2011, and the involvement of then-Senator John Kerry in these talks: Bryan Bender, "How John Kerry Opened a Secret Channel to Iran," *Boston Globe*, November 26, 2016, <https://bit.ly/2SZpQJ3>.

73 Aluf Benn, "Benjamin Netanyahu Sends Emergency Reserve Call-up to Himself and the Public," *Haaretz*, March 15, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2GZrl2D> [in Hebrew]; see also the assessment of a senior American military official: "It Is Possible that Israel Will Attack Iran without Warning," *nrg*, November 5, 2011, <https://bit.ly/2U4E1IY> [in Hebrew].

74 Sobelman, "Restraining an Ally."

that was reached in 2015.⁷⁵ The threatening rhetoric of the Israeli political leadership in those years had an additional cost: Israel was seen in the international arena as a potential aggressor that might ignite the entire region.⁷⁶

The attack threat was not the only one that brought about the increased pressure on Iran; other important developments occurred at the same time. For example, on November 8, 2011, an IAEA report was published on Iran's covert nuclear activity, following which international economic pressure on it was greatly intensified. At the end of 2011, the Obama administration imposed trade sanctions on Iranian banks, in January 2012 the European Union imposed a total oil boycott on Iran, and in the middle of March 2012 Iran was disconnected from the SWIFT money transfer system. President Obama even declared then that the American administration had a credible military option against Iran, and the US army conducted well-publicized tests of a new bunker buster bomb. Obama also reiterated his commitment to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.⁷⁷

The motif of emphasizing the non-nuclear threats in the Israeli cognitive campaign was intended mainly to serve the ultimate goal of preventing the nuclear threat. The circumstances required prioritizing one central objective. Other serious threats, such as the development of the firepower and proliferation of missiles or Iran's regional aggression did not receive sufficient attention in Western countries. Neither did the cognitive attempts to connect Iran to the threats of global terrorism; contrary to the messages of the Israeli campaign, Iran was not seen in the West as equivalent to ISIL but as fighting against it, that is, as having shared interests with the West. The

75 Ignatius, "The Omani 'Back Channel' to Iran."

76 For example, in an interview with CNN in February 2012, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, said that an Israeli attack on Iran would not achieve the long term objectives and "undermine stability"; "Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff: An Israeli Attack Will Not Achieve its End," *Ynet*, February 18, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2Ep58ZR>; the Prime Minister of Japan at the same time warned Defense Minister Barak that an attack on Iran is "a very dangerous act that will lead to escalation in the region," in "Japan to Barak: Don't Attack Iran – It is a Dangerous Act," *Ynet*, February 15, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2TfAr1q>; the French Foreign Minister declared that an attack on Iran "would destabilize the entire region," in Reuters, "France: An Attack on Iran would Upset the Stability of the Entire Region," *Channel 13 News*, November 6, 2011, <https://bit.ly/2SoTuSw>.

77 "Obama Aipac Speech," *The Guardian*, March 4, 2012, <https://bit.ly/2STiLta>.

two main threats that the world powers urgently had to deal with, in their view, were a possible Israeli attack, on one hand, and the Iranian nuclear program, on the other. From their perspective, both were addressed in the nuclear deal with Iran.

The fourth motif, which focused on opposing the framework of the agreement with Iran, did not succeed in preventing American compromises on the way to formulating the diplomatic agreement, which, as mentioned, was seen as defective by Israel. It is possible that from the outset the Israeli cognitive campaign did not have much of a chance of modifying the determination of Obama and of his Secretary of State, John Kerry, or the American compromises that were made in the covert talks in Oman.⁷⁸ However, the cognitive campaign in 2013-2015, whose rhetorical climax was Netanyahu's Congressional speech in March 2015, served as the backdrop and preparation for the Israeli diplomatic campaign that was renewed after the election of Donald Trump as President, and contributed to the US withdrawal from the nuclear pact with Iran in May 2018. The four main Israeli motifs of the Israeli campaign – the danger of a nuclear Iran, the Iranian regional threat and the missile threat, the threat of an Israeli military attack, and the issue of the agreement with Iran – continue to characterize the Israeli cognitive campaign today in varying degrees.

It is not clear if the Israeli actions and threats have had significant influence on the Iranian regime. Iran warned Israel not to dare to attack it, threatened an overwhelming response, and frequently related, first and foremost, to the American military threats. Israel, for its part, dismissed the Iranian cognitive counter-efforts that aimed to reassure the West. A prominent example of such an Iranian action was the *fatwa* that was supposedly pronounced by Iran's spiritual leader, Sayyid Ali Hosseini Khamenei, rejecting the production, dissemination, and use of nuclear weapons.⁷⁹

78 Jay Solomon, "Secret Dealing with Iran Led to Nuclear Talks," *Wall Street Journal*, June 28, 2015.

79 Michael Eisenstadt and Mehdi Khalaji, "Nuclear Fatwa: Religion and Politics in Iran's Proliferation Strategy," *Policy Focus* 115, September 2011.

Lessons Learned

A Cognitive Campaign as Leverage to Motivate a Superpower

The central goal of Israel's cognitive campaign against Iran's nuclear program was to use the United States as leverage. The complexity of the campaign stemmed from the differences in power and capabilities between Israel and the US, and from the necessity that Israel saw in refraining from jeopardizing its special relations with Washington, which, as we know, are a critical component of Israel's national security. In light of this, one lesson to be learned is that in any cognitive struggle, especially one that aims to influence the leaders of a world power, it is essential to fully control and balance the campaign messages in all channels. The Israeli leadership needs to well identify the interests and sensitivities of the US, including all of the parties within it. Israel should express its independent position, but at the same time also make sure not to be seen as carrying out a manipulative policy, or as pushing the US towards military intervention against its will.

The Strategic Conceptions and Interests of Leaders of World Powers Limit the Effectiveness of Cognitive Campaigns

Despite the Israeli attempt to tarnish Iran's image, the Obama administration and the leaders of the other world powers saw it as a rational actor that can be a partner in the struggle against ISIL and in regional agreements. In addition, President Obama had an interest in attaining a diplomatic achievement on the issue of Iran's nuclear program and leaving behind a legacy, one of whose headlines would be an agreement with Iran. The Israeli attempt to convince Obama that the agreement with Iran was problematic and dangerous in the long term did not change his determination.

Creating a Sense of Threat: A Central Factor in Accelerating Decision Making Processes among Leaders

Thus, the sense of threat from the United States that Iran experienced after the war in Iraq led it to freeze its military nuclear project in 2003. The threat of an Israeli attack on Iran and the fear of a resulting regional war seems to have created a similar feeling among the world powers. And in 2011-2012, the Iranian regime was swayed, most likely, by the heavy economic pressure and by the threat of severe international isolation. This influence led it to

decide to “drink the cup of poison” and begin direct negotiations with the US, which in the end led to the 2015 agreement.

Motifs in a Long Term Cognitive Campaign have a Limited Window of Opportunity

It is important to understand the limitations of the window of opportunity for realizing each of the motifs of a cognitive campaign. After the moment has passed, the specific motif should be changed and a different one should be emphasized. For example, after the regular motif of warning against the danger inherent in Iranian nuclear weapons did not lead to sufficient pressure on Iran until 2010, in the next stage the threat of an Israeli attack was added in an attempt to exert more effective pressure on it. This motif also ran its course when intensive negotiations with Iran began. At that stage, Israel’s influence had become relatively meager.

Accepted Narratives among the Israeli Public are not Always Relevant in the Wider World

The Israeli public identified with the partly emotional cognitive campaign, which made use of imagery from the Holocaust and from Jewish history. The cost of a campaign with such motifs raised levels of anxiety among the Israeli public. These same messages were also somewhat effective for parts of the American public, where they aimed to explain Israel’s authentic fears and the legitimacy of its reasons for taking action. However, their influence on other governments in the West seems to have been negligible. Thus, emotional local narratives are mainly relevant for the public that shares the same cultural worldview and conceptual framework, and are not necessarily well-accepted among foreign audiences.

Mixed Messages Can be Viewed as Manipulation

A possible Israeli attack was justified by the need to damage Iran’s nuclear facilities in order to delay, at least by a few years, the implementation of its nuclear program. The agreement with Iran in 2015 also froze the nuclear program, in this case for at least 10 years, thus seemingly achieving the same goal as the threatened attack. Against this backdrop, Israel’s opposition to the nuclear agreement met with skepticism, both in Europe and in the United States.

An Aggressive and Focused Cognitive Campaign Can Advance a Certain Cause, at the Expense of Other Issues

The Israeli campaign focused on the Iranian nuclear threat, and the diplomatic negotiations and the subsequent agreement also dealt only with that issue. The cost of this was that Iran has continued to develop and work intensively on non-nuclear fields, almost entirely without paying the price for this internationally. Today, these fields pose concrete and significant threats for Israel and other countries in the region. While the US administration, with Israel's encouragement, has been trying to rectify this situation and demanding Iranian compromises on all issues, including its missiles, regional intervention, and support for terrorist organizations, to date this has not yielded significant achievements.