

# A Conceptual Framework and Decision Making Model for Israel about Iran

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In recent months the public has been inundated with information on the Iranian nuclear issue. Some of the information has contributed to sound, open public discourse, whereas some of the information has been tendentious, vague, and rife with internal contradictions. Therefore, it is imperative that the current discussion rely on solid facts and the ability to assess the credibility of various sources of information and the motives of those supplying it. Underlying the discussion is an understanding that the issue is complex and has no magic solution. Above all, the analysis demands a logical conceptual framework and a clear, transparent decision making model for the authorized decision making forum.

Any discussion of the Iranian nuclear issue must begin from the premise that this is not an issue concerning Israel alone. The Iranian nuclear issue is a strategic, security, and political challenge to the entire international community, and Israel must avoid leading the global charge against Iran. It behooves Israel to take a back seat and not assume exclusive responsibility for preventing Iranian nuclearization.

When examining the Iranian nuclear issue, several major intelligence-related questions arise, whose answers lay the foundation for strategic and political guidelines. Among them: Is the objective of the Iranian nuclear program to manufacture nuclear weapons? If so, what is Iran's

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strategy? How soon would Iran have nuclear bombs? If there were a successful strike against Iran, for how long would this postpone its attainment of the bomb? What would Iran's response be to an attack?

The estimation is that Iran, endowed with a careful but determined strategy, is progressing towards developing nuclear weapons. In the last decade, Iran has crossed the technological threshold and equipped itself with all the necessary capabilities and components to break out towards nuclear weapons the moment it decides to do so. That is to say, the Iranians will have a bomb when they decide they want it plus whatever breakout time is needed.

One may point to five possible strategies to block, neutralize, or significantly delay Iranian military nuclearization: negotiations over an agreement, crippling sanctions, covert action, a military strike, and regime change. A sixth strategy, containment and deterrence, accepts a nuclear Iran. The first five strategies, designed to thwart an Iranian military nuclear program, complement and support one another. Thus, any combination of strategies comprises a dynamic mix of diplomacy, international supervision and verification, steps in the technological and manufacturing areas, PR, and of course operational military moves. At the same time, there is uncertainty as to how Iran would respond to the different strategies. Any situation assessment must be fluid and relate to the relative and cumulative effects of each move, both on the Iranian regime and the Iranian people.

Without the existence of a credible threat of military action, the other strategies cannot generate results. Consider the interesting paradox: those who publicly claim that there is no military option or that it is too risky and its cost unacceptable are liable to create a situation in which it will be the only strategy left to block Iranian military nuclearization, whereas precisely those who prepare a possible and credible military option could create a situation in which it will not be necessary. Without a credible military option, the probability that the world will come together to support sanctions and the Iranians will understand that it is best for them to arrive at an agreement is much lower than with such a threat.

Careful examination of the sixth strategy – accepting that Iran has the bomb and relying on deterrence – suggests it is an unstable and risky option. Contrary to assertions made primarily in the United States, whereby were Iran to attain the bomb, there would be a stable “balance

of fear” as there was during the Cold War, the situation is completely different with regard to the Islamic Republic of Iran, due to several critical factors: an extreme religious ideology calling for wiping Israel off the map guides the Iranian decision making system; there are serious difficulties with controlling escalation and crises, because the sides do not communicate and have no diplomatic relations; there is the constant temptation to launch a first strike; and the relative sizes of the two nations is asymmetric and encourages instability. The existence of multilateral conflicts in the region and historical and current enmities would almost certainly lead to nuclear proliferation in the region. The presence of proxies, including terrorist groups, is another factor increasing instability, especially given the danger of nuclear matter falling into their hands.

Any strategy Israel chooses to confront Iranian nuclearization – especially by military means – must fulfill three preconditions: serving the supreme strategic need to prevent Iranian nuclearization, i.e., understanding that Iran in possession of military nuclear capabilities is the worst option for preventing a nuclear Iran; b) operational capabilities, i.e., Israeli capabilities to undertake an operation that would postpone the Iranian nuclear program by a significant period of time; c) legitimacy, i.e., the requisite level of international support for action, after understanding that all other options have been exhausted. This legitimacy is especially important vis-à-vis the United States.

Consequently, Israel faces a choice between two strategic options, both of which are high risk in terms of national security. One can see this as a choice between “bombs,” and here the assessment is that the cost of an Iranian nuclear bomb is higher than the cost of bombing Iran. Furthermore, the Iranian response is considered not as dangerous as suggested by senior members of the American security establishment. Iran’s threats prior to an attack are an effective means of deterrence, but the Iranians have neither the capability nor the interest in setting fire to the entire Middle East. It is almost certain that there would be an Iranian response after an attack, but calculated Iranian interests suggest that it would be measured and tolerable, especially in light of the achievement of stopping Iran’s nuclear program. It has been said that in the next few months Iran will enter the zone of immunity, seemingly requiring an Israeli operation in the immediate future. However, the zone of immunity need not be the leading parameter in considerations on attacking Iran.

It is necessary to exhaust any third alternative – acceptance of neither Iranian nuclear bombs nor an attack on Iran – if there is a way to prevent Iran arming itself with nuclear bombs. In the next few months, it will be critical to exhaust the route of substantive sanctions on Iran and see if they affect Iran's willingness to come to an agreement. It is also important to build up maximal legitimacy for a future strike should diplomacy fail.

In this context, it is important to understand the components of a good – even if not ideal – agreement that may be a better alternative than either “the bomb” or “the bombing.” Such an agreement would have to include three parameters: removing most enriched matter outside of Iran's borders for processing into nuclear fuel; stopping operations at the Fordow facility (rendering the zone of immunity parameter redundant); and more significant and effective inspections (at least according to the parameters of the Additional Protocol). Much caution must be taken not to enter into a bad agreement, liable to be a shared interest of Iran and the major world powers and reached in order to prevent an Israeli attack. An agreement limiting enrichment to 5 percent and even removing matter enriched to 20 percent is a bad agreement, because full enrichment capabilities and its future products would remain in Iran. This is an agreement from which Iran would be able to break out towards nuclear weapons whenever it wanted and achieve them within a short period of time. A good agreement would be measured by its ability to stop the nuclear clock and even turn it back. A good agreement would keep Iran at least two years away from nuclear bombs.

It would be a mistake to view an attack and its aftermath as an isolated incident. Rather, correct strategic thinking must weigh and assess what would happen on the day after the strike and in the decade after the attack. It is essential to plan well and integrate thinking about the operation with planning for the greater campaign. Theoretically, the best result of a military operation would be a five year delay. To turn those five years into ten – and then into many decades as was the case with Iraq, and the case of Syria where, five years after the attack, there is no sign of the project being renewed – it is incumbent to ensure that the entire world is prepared to participate in the ongoing effort to stop Iran the day and the decade after the attack. Demonstrating the scope of losses to Iran from maintaining its military nuclear program, continuing the sanctions, blocking critical technologies and materials, threatening repeated

attacks, and continuing diplomatic pressure are all part of a necessary next stage campaign in which Israel cannot succeed on its own. This manifests the importance of gaining legitimacy for an Israeli strike and international – or at least American – recognition that Israel acted only after all other attempts had failed.

When one considers all the components of such a campaign, one must of course note the differences between Israel and the United States in terms of approach and capabilities. While President Obama's speech at the March 2012 AIPAC conference marked agreement between the two nations on the strategic goal, namely stopping Iran from attaining military nuclear capabilities, the two countries disagree on what would constitute the trigger for military action. The differences of opinion stem from different assessments of risk, intelligence, effectiveness of the sanctions, and operational capabilities.

Because of these differences, the two nations have different red lines, leading to different understandings about the right timing for an attack. While Israel defines the red line at the point where Iran can break out to nuclear weapons, the United States identifies the line at the time of breakout in practice. The question, then, is, when the Iranian program is extensive, redundant, robust, and capable of breaking out within a short time, can American intelligence identify the breakout on short notice, and can so weighty a decision as attacking Iran be made and carried out within the tight timeframe of the Iranian breakout. In any case, should there be an American attack, it would in have to be surgical and limited to the nuclear sites to reduce the probability of a widespread, ongoing regional conflagration. A focused operation would make it clear to Iran that it still has much to lose should it decide to expand the confrontation.

An open, in-depth dialogue between Israel and the United States may, to the extent there is trust between the two leaders, lead to the possibility of realizing the third option, i.e., neither "the bomb" nor "the bombing." If the Iranian nuclear project is not blocked by agreement or covert activity and its nuclear clock does not stop ticking, military action against Iran would earn greater legitimacy, along with American support the day and the decade after. Without legitimacy allowing an international campaign over the subsequent decade, Israel faces the risk of finding itself opting for bombing and bearing its full cost, and still ending up with the Iranian bomb and its attendant dangers.