

# Is There an Alternative Strategy in Response to Iran's Nuclear Progress?

Shimon Stein | No. 1684 | January 19, 2023

In an interview in *Haaretz* on January 1, 2023, Maj. Gen. (res.) Tamir Hayman, former head of Military Intelligence and currently Managing Director of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), stated that the Israeli strategy that sought (and seeks) to fell the nuclear agreement with Iran has failed, and that the last three Prime Ministers of Israel pursued this aim without presenting an alternative program. Israel, the United States, and other countries succeeded only in postponing or slowing the progress of the Iranian military nuclear project, while hopes for regime change in Iran that might have led to a shift in nuclear intentions were not realized. There may be a chance for a new situation if the US changes its current approach, which is not sufficient to deter Iran from continuing to pursue nuclear bombs. In the absence of such a change, Israel must prepare for the day after – a reality of a Middle East with Iran as at least a nuclear threshold state, and in the future, efforts by additional states in the region to advance nuclear programs to guarantee the survival of their regimes.

In an interview published in *Haaretz* on January 1, 2023, Maj. Gen. (res.) Tamir Hayman, former head of Military Intelligence and currently Managing Director of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), stated that the Israeli strategy that sought (and seeks) to fell the nuclear agreement with Iran has failed, and that the last three Prime Ministers of Israel pursued this aim without presenting an alternative program. Hayman said, “I find significant confusion and strategic inconsistency that I cannot understand.” This is a severe charge toward a political leadership that describes the Iranian nuclear program as an existential threat.

According to Hayman, in the current reality Israel must work along two axes: the axis of an agreement (the JCPOA was a deal, not an agreement) and the offensive axis. In order to advance the agreement/deal axis, Iran should be offered a very tempting arrangement and in exchange must restrain the progress of its nuclear program (along with a strict regime of oversight by the International Atomic Energy Agency). Regarding the offensive axis, Hayman is convinced that there is a formula for an effective Israeli military attack that will not escalate into a regional war. Yet he adds: "We have unequivocal capabilities and they have been very effective, but this may lead us toward two developments, that are not certain, but they are dangerous: regional war and accelerated Iranian motivation to acquire a bomb the day after an attack." Moreover, Hayman emphasizes a historic conclusion that should raise question marks about the offensive option due to the heavy price Israel would incur, stating that "every war against nuclear weapons is a war for time. History shows that a government that decides to pursue nuclear weapons will acquire them...Any attack could change the Iranian strategy from one of ambiguity to one of demonstrated nuclear power." Furthermore, "nuclear powers survive." Herein are two insights that prompt the understanding that even an attack that significantly harms Iran's capabilities would increase its motivation to acquire nuclear bombs.

In light of the criticism of the current Israeli strategy for dealing with Iran's progress toward a bomb – or the lack thereof – the question arises: Is there an alternative strategy to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons?

It is doubtful whether the alternative strategy Hayman proposes is fundamentally different from the strategy that, in his own words, has failed. The common denominator of both is the desire to slow the development of the Iranian nuclear program, via sanctions and actions in Iran and beyond while preparing a credible military option in the event that the diplomacy/sanctions track fails. The goal is to buy time, with the hope of a regime change that may or may not reverse Tehran's intention to manufacture nuclear weapons. Is this a strategy for responding to Iran's progress towards military nuclear capabilities?

A response to the Iranian nuclear project must address two dimensions – intentions and capabilities. The regime’s intention to attain a nuclear option is both aimed at ensuring the survival of the regime – from its perspective, an important aim in and of itself – and responding to their threats perceptions. From the regional perspective, Iran sees an environment of nuclear states. Iran does not have a conventional answer to the presence of the US military in the region, which was strengthened in the early 1990s. Accordingly, building a nuclear option, even if it involves a massive investment in the first stage, will make Iran immune to the fate imposed on Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. Therefore, so long as the threat perception doesn’t change and the regime in Tehran continues to fear for its survival, there is no reason to assume that Iran will diverge from its attempt to achieve nuclear capabilities.

Since it became clear that the regime of the ayatollahs renewed its nuclear program, Israel has engaged in an effort to prevent it from receiving external assistance for building the scientific-technical infrastructure connected to the nuclear fuel cycle. This effort has been partially successful. Israel has subsequently sought to delay the program’s development via covert actions and political and financial-economic measures. As a result, after more than three decades of ceaseless effort, Iran still has not achieved its aim of acquiring a nuclear weapon. However, delaying the program does not mean that Iran has changed its strategic intention; the opposite is true. Iran is more determined than ever to achieve its aim, and it is now quite close to this potential. The current argument is over whether Iran has already reached the status of a nuclear threshold state, or how close it is to meeting all the conditions in this category: enriching uranium to levels of 90 percent (the technical ability exists and the question is how long it will take to acquire the necessary quantity to manufacture several bombs); acquiring an explosive devices (there is a disagreement regarding which stage of this aspect Iran has reached); and building launch mechanisms. It is believed that Iran has the technical capabilities and that the “breakout” to a bomb is a matter of a government decision.

The decision by the Trump administration (with the active encouragement of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu) to withdraw from the JCPOA should also be seen in the context of a delay. The withdrawal from the deal, which in spite of all its drawbacks helped delay the program, merely increased Iranian motivation to move ahead significantly toward its aim, notwithstanding the additional sanctions imposed on it.

A further means of delaying the progress of the program is a military attack on the nuclear infrastructure. The example of the attack on the Osirak reactor in Iraq (1981) is not relevant here, even if for a variety of reasons Iraq has not achieved nuclear capabilities at any time between then and now. Iran, unlike Iraq at that time, has a dispersed infrastructure that would be difficult to destroy in a single attack. And here Hayman's statements about the risks entailed in a military attack should be recalled – irrespective of possible Israeli capabilities to deal a mortal blow to the nuclear infrastructure and thereby set it back in a significant fashion,

An additional means of delaying Iranian nuclear efforts, which is relevant today, is credible American deterrence. Israeli deterrence, credible as it is, will not be sufficient to deter Iran from taking the final steps to complete its program. Declarations such as “all options are on the table” and the promise that the United States will not allow Iran to acquire a bomb are not sufficient to deter Iran. The challenge Israel faces is thus to bring about a change in the position of the US. The change must be translated into even harsher sanctions and isolating Iran more firmly internationally, while placing a red line that obligates the US to take military action if Iran crosses it. Those moves together would make American deterrence more credible than it is today.

The disadvantage of the current strategy – and hence the criticism of the strategy – is that it has not been fully realized. The chance for fully materializing it, via political, economic, and/or military measures, does not depend on Israel, which can play its part as it has done until today with partial success. Therefore, Israel must continue its efforts first and foremost to enlist the US, together with other states, to inject stronger

backing of their stated determination to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. The military option mentioned is not an alternative strategy, but an additional means to delay Iranian progress. Even if launched successfully, it is unlikely to change the intentions of the regime. The opposite is true – it will probably increase Tehran's motivation and its decision to break out to a bomb (here the example of Iraq in the wake of the destruction at Osirak is relevant). Pakistan and North Korea are also examples of states that were determined to acquire nuclear weapons and ultimately achieved their aim. Given that the success of a strategy that combines political and economic pressure and deterrence, which aims to harm Iranian capabilities, does not ensure a change in the regime's intention to acquire nuclear weapons, Israel must prepare for the day after and adapt its security strategy to reality – not only of a nuclear Iran, but also of the possibility that additional states will follow Iran in developing nuclear programs and thus acquire the ultimate guarantee for their own regime survival.

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