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Iran's Impending Nuclear Weapons and Posture: What It All Means?

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Still unimpeded, except by the embarrassingly minor annoyances of pretend diplomacy, Tehran now marches triumphantly toward final nuclear weapons status. Soon, when this exceptionally threatening development is confirmed in Tehran, Israel and the United States will try desperately to compensate for their original joint failures to preempt - that is, failures to undertake a preventive military action that could once have been operationally successful, and also been compliant with pertinent legal expectations of "anticipatory self-defense." In essence, this compensatory or default position will center on instituting a stable and thoroughly dependable system of *nuclear deterrence*.

To be sure, any such residual effort by Washington and Jerusalem will be both well-intentioned and indispensable. After all, to avoid a future of potentially measureless regrets and lamentations, these two starkly asymmetrical allies will need to reconstruct certain core elements of "mutual assured destruction." MAD, of course, was the original nuclear threat-based scheme that successfully preserved superpower peace during the U.S.-Soviet Cold War. Moreover, back in 1995, General David Ivry, then Director-General of the Israeli Ministry of Defense, and later Ambassador to Washington, had openly referred to MAD "as a model for Israel."

Ironically, perhaps, any such joint US-Israeli reconstruction, based loosely upon MAD, is apt to take place at the same time that the United States and Russia could embark upon a second Cold War, a "second-generation" protracted conflict characterized (assorted treaties of limitation notwithstanding) by yet another "superpower" nuclear arms race.

Will such an eleventh-hour reconstruction effort work? Admittedly, it would seem odd to wax nostalgic about the first or original Cold War, but, in retrospect, that earlier standoff between "two scorpions in a bottle" (Manhattan Project physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer's famous metaphor) may soon look relatively

benign. At that time, after all, the two dominant national players did share an unambiguous and overriding commitment to stay "alive." Then, neither side was animated by primal or atavistic religious sentiments, and both sides were prudentially disposed to "coexistence."

Most importantly, both the Americans and the Soviets, from the 1950s until the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union rapidly imploded, were predictably "rational."

Today, in the Middle East and elsewhere, rationality remains a key factor in all deterrence logic. More precisely, in order to be sustained in world politics, any system of deterrence must be premised on a plausible assumption of rationality. Specifically, by definition, this means that each side must consistently believe that the other side will value its continued national survival more highly than any other preference, or combination of preferences.

In the first Cold War era, rationality proved to be an indisputably reasonable and correct assumption. Now, however, we may have good reason to doubt that MAD could work as well in the chaotic Middle East, as it did during that Cold War. Conceivably, at least in certain singular cases, a nuclear-endowed *Jihadist* regime in Tehran might not be willing to unerringly maintain the same stable hierarchy of national preferences. Even though Iran's president Hassan Rouhani sounds substantially less inflammatory than did his predecessor, it is still the Grand Ayatollah who will be authorizing the most critical or existential national decisions.

Will the Grand Ayatollah and his clerical retinues be consistently rational?

Over time, the principal decision-makers in Tehran could well turn out to be just as rational as were the Soviets. Still, there is certainly no way of knowing this for sure, or, for that matter, of predicting Iranian rationality with any previously-tested bases of reliable judgment. Mathematically, of course, there is simply no acceptable way to ascertain the probability of unique events, and an Iranian leadership that could deliberately slouch toward a nuclear apocalypse is plainly not discoverable in any history.

This brings up the most sobering question of all. What if there should be no preemption against Iran, a forfeiture decision which now seems irreversible, and if consequent nuclear deterrence postures in Washington and Jerusalem should somehow fail to prevent an Iranian nuclear attack? What, exactly, would actually happen, if all "containment" strategies were to fail vis-à-vis Iran, and that government were to launch a nuclear *Jihad* against Israel, whether as an atomic "bolt from the blue," or, instead, as the result of escalation, either deliberate, or inadvertent?

In considering this most basic question, it must first be kept in mind that even a fully rational Iranian adversary could sometime decide to launch against Israel, owing to (1) incorrect information used in its vital decisional calculations; (2) mechanical, electronic, or computer malfunctions; (3) unauthorized decisions to fire in the national decisional command authority; and/or (4) *coup d'état*.

Almost thirty-five years ago, I published the first of many subsequent books that contained informed descriptions of the physical and medical consequences of a nuclear war. These descriptions were focused generically on *any* nuclear exchange, and were extracted primarily from a respected and comprehensive 1975 report issued by the National Academy of Sciences. Although they were not generated with any particular reference to the Middle East, their core calculations of physics and biology were universally applicable, and were not in any way geographically limited.

These calculations included the following significant and still probable outcomes: large temperature changes; contamination of food and water; disease epidemics in crops, domesticated animals, and humans due to ionizing radiation; shortening of growing seasons; irreversible injuries to aquatic species; widespread and long-term cancers due to inhalation of plutonium particles; radiation-induced abnormalities in persons *in utero* at the time of detonations; a vast growth in the number of skin cancers, and increasing genetic disease.

We may currently predict, surely without controversy, that overwhelming health problems would afflict the survivors of any Iranian nuclear attack upon Israel. These "insults," to use proper medical parlance, would extend beyond prompt burn injuries. Retinal burns, for example, could occur in the eyes of many persons located far from the actual explosions.

Arguably, Israel, as a state, would not physically disappear. In a strict technical or literal sense, therefore, the attack outcomes would not be genuinely "existential." Still, tens of thousands of Israelis, Arabs as well as Jews, could be crushed by collapsing structures, and torn to pieces by flying glass.

Many others could fall victim to raging firestorms. Fallout injuries would include whole-body radiation injury, produced by penetrating, hard gamma radiations; superficial radiation burns, produced by soft radiations; and assorted injuries produced by deposits of radioactive substances within the body.

After an Iranian nuclear attack, even a "small" one, those few medical facilities that might still exist in Israel would be taxed beyond capacity. Water supplies could become unusable. Housing and shelter could be unavailable for hundreds of thousands (in principle, at least, perhaps even *millions*) of survivors. Transportation would break down to rudimentary levels. Food shortages would be crippling, critical, and foreseeably, long-term.

By definition, standard economic theories, based on verifiable historical data, would no longer be meaningful. Israel's normally complex network of exchange systems would be shattered. Virtually everyone would be deprived of the most rudimentary means of livelihood.

Emergency police and fire services would be decimated. Systems dependent upon electrical power could stop functioning, perhaps for months. Severe trauma would occasion widespread disorientation and psychiatric disorders, for which there would be no conceivably reliable therapeutic services.

Mimicking the fictional *Lord of the Flies*, a prophetic book by author William Golding, normal human society would abruptly cease. Following Hurricane Katrina, a far less catastrophic assault on a major American city, basic mechanisms of civil order were torn away in less than 24 hours. Recalling assorted human effects of the savage New Orleans storm, we may expect, after an Iranian nuclear attack on Israel, eruptions of murder and banditry. These would add substantially to the extant harms of plague, and assorted other disease epidemics.

Today, with the emerging worldwide Ebola crisis, we can readily observe that deadly pathogens may pose grave personal and communal risks even when the larger society remains fully capable and intact. Imagine, therefore, how much more dangerous these pathogens could become in a society already leveled by an enemy nuclear attack.

After any Iranian nuclear attack, many Israeli survivors could expect a marked increase in serious degenerative pathologies. They could also expect premature death, impaired vision, and sterility. Based also

upon what we know about 1945 atomic bomb effects in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, an increased incidence of leukemia and cancers of the lung, stomach, breast, ovary and uterine cervix would be indicated.

Undoubtedly, extensive fallout would leave its uniquely corrosive mark upon Israel. Over time, it could upset many ordinary and delicately balanced relationships in nature. For example, those Israelis who had survived the actual nuclear attack would still have to deal with greatly enlarged insect populations. Like the locusts of biblical times, these mushrooming insect hordes could spread widely beyond the radiation-damaged areas in which they first arose.

Significantly, insects are generally more resistant to radiation than humans. This fact, coupled with the prevalence of unburied corpses, uncontrolled waste, and untreated sewage, would likely generate *tens of trillions* of flies and mosquitoes. Breeding in the dead bodies, these insects would make it effectively impossible to control typhus, malaria, dengue fever, and encephalitis. Perhaps, also, Ebola.

Throughout Israel, tens or perhaps hundreds of thousands of rotting human corpses would pose the single largest health threat. Simply to bury the bodies would prove to be a staggering and conceivably impossible task. Here, unceremonious mass cremations could prove to be the only viable "solution." In this connection, an insufferably Holocaust-related imagery of Jewish annihilation could become indelible.

Reciprocally, these same catastrophic effects, possibly even more expansive and destructive, would be wreaked upon Iran by Israel. An immediate and massive Israeli nuclear retaliation for any Iranian nuclear aggression would be inevitable. More than likely, in both Israel and Iran, legions of battered survivors would scavenge widely for whatever is needed to simply stay alive.

More than likely, these still-living corpses would literally envy the dead.

None of this nightmarish scenario would ever need to be contemplated if Iran could still be kept from fashioning nuclear weapons. Barring the highly unlikely prospect of any eleventh-hour preemption against Iranian hard targets, however, it will become absolutely necessary to implement a purposeful and conspicuous program of regional nuclear deterrence. With this refined threat program in place, Israel - at least in principle - could identify any still-remaining options for deterring both rational and irrational decision-makers in Tehran.

Although, by definition, irrational Iranian adversaries would not value their own national survival most highly, they could still maintain a determinable, transitive, and potentially manipulable ordering of preferences. It follows that Washington and Jerusalem should promptly undertake a consciously joint effort to accurately anticipate this expected hierarchy of wants, and then to fashion all corollary deterrent threats accordingly. It should also be borne in mind that Iranian preference-orderings would not be created in a vacuum. In this connection, assorted strategic developments in both Pakistan and (eventually) "Palestine" could significantly impact such orderings, either as consequential "synergies," or - in more expressly military language - as menacing "force multipliers."

In the best of all possible worlds, Israel and the United States would never have permitted Iran to reach these penultimate stages of nuclear weapons development. But, as French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire had already recognized back in the 18th Century, this is not the best of all possible worlds. It is, therefore, immediately incumbent upon both Jerusalem and Washington to set the necessary foundations for reliable nuclear deterrence in the Middle East. Israel and the United States, both singly, and in unique

collaboration with one another, should now focus upon implementing appropriately urgent final security measures.

These measures would intend to ensure that Iran's leaders could never calculate any nuclear aggression against Israel to be gainful or cost-effective. Among other things, including suitable refinements of Israel's Arrow-3 ballistic missile defense (BMD) program,¹ and also its apparent expansions of nuclear sea-basing (submarines),² this would mean a partial and selective end to the country's longstanding policy of "deliberate nuclear ambiguity." Soon, in order to enhance the critical persuasiveness of its indispensable nuclear deterrent, Israel will have to partially and selectively remove its "bomb from the basement." Precisely how best to carry out this daunting obligation will represent an intellectual task of the highest possible difficulty.

The point here, of course, would not be to reveal the obvious - that is, that Israel merely *has* the bomb - but rather, to communicate to all prospective adversaries, especially Iran, that its existing nuclear forces are (1) *usable* (not too destructive); (2) *well-protected*; and (3) *capable of penetrating* any nuclear aggressor's active defenses.

Now that an Iranian military nuclear capability is pretty much a *fait accompli*, such critically nuanced communication could become the mainstay of Israel's physical survival as a state.

¹ See, on this issue: Louis René Beres and (Major-General/IDF/Res.) Isaac Ben-Israel, "Think Anticipatory Self-Defense," *The Jerusalem Post*, October 22, 2007; Professor Beres and MG Ben-Israel, "The Limits of Deterrence," *Washington Times*, November 21, 2007; Professor Beres and MG Ben-Israel, "Deterring Iran," *Washington Times*, June 10, 2007; Professor Beres and MG Ben-Israel, "Deterring Iranian Nuclear Attack," *Washington Times*, January 27, 2009; and Professor Beres and MG Ben-Israel, "Defending Israel from Iranian Nuclear Attack," *The Jewish Press*, March 13, 2013. See also: Louis René Beres and (General/USAF/ret.) John T. Chain, "Living With Iran," BESA Center for Strategic Studies, Israel, May 2014; and Louis Rene Beres and (Lt.General/USAF/ret.) Thomas McInerney, "Obama's Inconceivable, Undesirable, Nuclear-Free Dream," *U.S. News & World Report*, August 29, 2013.

² See, on this aspect: Louis René Beres and (Admiral/USN/ret.) Leon "Bud" Edney, "Israel's Nuclear Strategy: A Larger Role for Submarine-Basing," *The Jerusalem Post*, August 17, 2014; and Professor Beres and Admiral Edney, "A Sea-Based Nuclear Deterrent for Israel," *Washington Times*, September 5, 2014