

Agreement with Iran a Requiem for Israel's Nuclear Ambiguity?

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Somehow, although it has yet to be mentioned, there is a plainly foreseeable connection between the just-completed nuclear agreement with Iran, and Israel's nuclear weapons program. Inevitably, the mere pretense of Iranian compliance with newly codified nuclear curtailment norms will place corollary pressures upon Israel to join the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), or a regional nuclear weapons free zone.

This is the case, moreover, even if Israel's bomb would remain benignly in the "basement," that is, undeclared and unthreatening.

In world politics, some truths are unassailable.

Without its nuclear weapons and doctrine, Israel could effectively become complicit in its own disappearance. More precisely, should Israel ever be compelled to accept its own denuclearization, that country – less than half the size of America's Lake Michigan – might as well consent publicly to incremental dismemberment. Indeed, even if pertinent enemy states, Arab countries as well as Iran, were to remain non-nuclear themselves, these irremediable foes would still be in an enhanced position to finally defeat Israel.

In global strategy, as Clausewitz, the famous Prussian strategist, understood long before the Atomic Age, there can come a time of reckoning when "mass counts."

In the Middle East, lest we forget, only Israel's enemies have mass. Over the years, a number of Arab states and Iran, themselves still non-nuclear, have called disingenuously for Israel's membership in the NPT, and for a "nuclear weapon free zone." Looking ahead, even if these viscerally sectarian and fragmenting states were willing to comply with any formal legal expectations of such a zone – a remarkably optimistic presumption – their more-or-less combined conventional, chemical and biological capabilities could still overwhelm Israel.

Might diplomacy help to correct any such imbalance? In principle, it would seem, expanded Israeli vulnerability might still be countered by instituting certain parallel forms of non-nuclear disarmament among the Arab states and Iran. In reality, however, any such coinciding and reciprocal steps would never be undertaken.

US President Barack Obama, who calls passionately for a world "free of nuclear weapons," fails to realize that rhythmically stirring oratory is not always enough. In fact, for the region as a whole, nuclear weapons are not the problem per se.

Rather, in the Middle East, the core issue remains a far-reaching and unreconstructed Arab/Iranian commitment to excise Israel from the map.

The only primal issue here concerns a blatantly extinctive Islamic cartography.

Oddly, perhaps, Palestinian and Iranian maps reveal wholly unhidden plans for genocide against "the Jews." In both cases, religiously, at least, these openly contemplated crimes against humanity stem conspicuously from assorted sacred eschatologies of "sacrifice" and "martyrdom."

Here, too, the exterminatory doctrines stem equally from Sunni and Shi'ite sources.

With its nuclear weapons, even while still deliberately ambiguous, or “in the basement,” Israel can deter unconventional attacks, and also most large conventional ones. While in possession of such weapons, Israel could also launch certain cost-effective non-nuclear preemptive strikes against any enemy state’s hard military targets that might threaten Israel’s annihilation.

Without these nuclear weapons, any such expressions of “anticipatory self-defense” could likely represent the onset of a much wider and asymmetrically destructive (to Israel) war.

The rationale for this argument is readily identifiable.

In essence, without nuclear backup, there would no longer exist any compelling threat of an Israeli counter-retaliation. It follows, contrary to the US president’s misplaced preferences for global nuclear disarmament, that Israel’s nuclear weapons represent a vitally important instrument of regional peace, and, correspondingly, a needed impediment to regional nuclear war.

Always, strategy requires nuance. In his blanket proposal for “a world without nuclear weapons,” however, President Obama has been thinking without any differentiation or subtlety.

To survive into the future, the international community will have to make various critical nuclear distinctions between individual states and national nuclear deterrence postures. In the special case of Israel, it will soon need to be acknowledged, nuclear weapons are potentially all that can prevent a grievously destructive and genocidal war.

Significantly, the residual national right to threaten or even use nuclear weapons in order to survive is enshrined jurisprudentially at the 1996 Advisory Opinion on Nuclear Weapons, by the UN’s International Court of Justice.

Neither the president of the United States nor the UN Security Council can assure Israel's survival amid growing regional chaos. In the specific matter of nuclear weapons, moreover, not all countries are created equal. For Israel, legitimately, these weapons represent the ultimate barrier to suffering violent extinction. They are, for Israel, and also for the wider system of civilized states, a latent blessing, not a curse.

Under international law, war and genocide are not mutually exclusive. Living in a world without Israeli nuclear weapons, Israel's principal enemies could quickly drive the Jewish state into oblivion. Such expressly genocidal action could seem altogether reasonable and rational for the perpetrators. This is because, individually or collaboratively, these aggressor states could now inflict distinctly mortal harms upon a theologically despised foe, without incurring intolerable harms themselves.

FOR THE moment, following the unwitting legitimization of Iranian nuclearization via patently futile diplomacy, Israel has the most to fear from Tehran. To be sure, if Iran's religious leadership should ever choose to abandon the usual premises of rational behavior in world politics – that is, to risk national destruction in a presumptive exchange for purifying the Dar al-Islam, the World of Islam – even Jerusalem's nuclear posture could fail. Nonetheless, even if Iran could sometime become a nuclear suicide-bomber writ large, Israel's only rational strategy, moving forward, must be 1) to hold on firmly to its nuclear armaments, and, as soon as Iran crosses the operational nuclear threshold, 2) to move determinedly beyond "deliberate ambiguity," toward carefully selected forms of nuclear disclosure.

International law is not a suicide pact. Long before atomic weapons, Cicero had already understood: "The safety of the people shall be the highest law." For Israel, living uneasily in plausible expectation of renewed global pressures to

renounce its nuclear weapons and posture, resisting such illegitimate pressures will remain indispensable.

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