

What Now for Israel?

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To be sure, following careful assessments of [the new Iran agreement](#), Israel's prime minister will need to make an 11th-hour decision on preemption. In principle, at least, considering any such defensive first strike against Iranian nuclear assets and infrastructures could still make strategic sense if the following conditions were assumed: 1. Iran will inevitably become militarily nuclear; 2. Iran will very likely plan to use its new nuclear forces in a first-strike aggression against Israel; and 3. Iran's key decision makers will likely be irrational. Regarding core definitions, irrational decision-makers would be those Iranian leaders who could sometime value certain preferences or combinations of preferences (e.g., certain Shiite religious expectations) more highly than Iran's national survival.

In the absence of any one of these three critical assumptions, the expected retaliatory costs to Israel of any contemplated preemption would plausibly exceed the expected benefits. Moreover, there would be nothing genuinely scientific about making such difficult policy choices. For one thing, all of the associated probability judgments would need to be overwhelmingly subjective.

How, for example, could Israeli analysts say anything meaningfully predictive about unique or unprecedented circumstances? In science, probabilities must always be based upon the determinable frequency of past events. Here, however, in pertinent history, there exists no usable guidance.

To wit, exactly how many preemptive attacks have already been launched by a nuclear state against a nearly-nuclear state? The "zero" answer is obvious and irrefutable. It must, therefore, be a cautionary reply.

An additional complication exists. The nearly-nuclear state, Iran, will still possess large conventional and chemical rocket forces. Many other threatening missiles will remain under the operational control of its sub-state terrorist proxies. Hezbollah, the well-armed Shiite militia, already has more rockets in its arsenal than do all NATO countries combined; it is even less likely than Iran's own leaders to hold back on any post-preemption retaliations.

All things considered, Israel's best security plan, going forward, would be to enhance its underlying nuclear deterrence posture, and to render this critical enhancement as conspicuous as possible. More precisely, this means that Jerusalem should do everything possible to signal to any future Iranian aggressor that its own nuclear forces are plainly survivable, and capable of penetrating any of Tehran's ballistic missile or other active defenses. Correspondingly, it will also become necessary for Israel [to move very carefully](#) beyond its traditional posture of deliberate nuclear ambiguity, or the so-called "bomb in the basement."

In the irremediably arcane world of Israeli nuclear deterrence, it can never be adequate that enemy states should simply acknowledge the Jewish State's nuclear status. It is equally important that these adversarial states believe Israel to hold usable and survivable nuclear forces, and be willing to employ these weapons in certain clear and readily identifiable circumstances. Israel's nuclear doctrine and weapons are necessary to various scenarios that could require conventional preemptive action, or more residually, a specifically nuclear retaliation.

In any event, for Israel, the core purpose of its nuclear weapons must always be deterrence *ex ante*, not revenge *ex post*.

An integral part of Israel's multi-layered security system lies in maintaining effective ballistic missile defenses,

primarily, the Arrow or "Hetz." Yet, even the well-regarded and successfully-tested Arrow could never achieve a sufficiently high capacity for missile intercept, a quality needed to adequately protect Israeli civilians from any Iranian nuclear attack. In essence, this means that Israel can never rely too heavily upon active defenses for its national protection.

What about the prospect of an irrational Iranian adversary? Any Israeli move from ambiguity to disclosure, however selective, might not help in the particular case of an irrational nuclear enemy . It remains possible, or even plausible, that certain elements of Iranian leadership will determinedly subscribe to certain end-times visions of a Shiite apocalypse. Still, taken by itself, such subscription does not automatically or even persuasively call for an Israeli preemption.

A few months ago, the German Federal Security Council approved the delivery of a fifth Dolphin-II class submarine to Israel. When it is time for Israel to selectively ease away from nuclear ambiguity, a fully-survivable, hardened and dispersed strategic second-strike force should be made generally recognizable. Further, such a robust strategic force should be designed to make any foe understand that the costs of planned nuclear aggression against Israel would assuredly result in destruction of the attacker's key cities. On this core point of high-value targeting, there should be reserved a [very special place for sea-basing](#) (submarines) a suitable portion of Israel's nuclear deterrent.

New agreements notwithstanding, growing instability in the Middle East now heightens the prospect for expansive new wars, either by deliberateness or by miscalculation. From the critical perspective of maintaining its credible nuclear deterrence against a still-nuclearizing Iran, Israel should prepare, *inter alia*, to reexamine and aptly modify its traditional policy of deliberate nuclear ambiguity. As for any

last-minute Israeli preemption against Iran, there exists no compelling scientific reason to believe that such a defensive strike would be ascertainably rational, or appropriately cost-effective.

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