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Israel at Sixty:

Asymmetry, Vulnerability, and the Search for Security

Gerald M. Steinberg

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- Sixty years ago few observers gave Israel much chance of survival. The small Jewish society faced a huge asymmetry in power, demography, and other factors. This asymmetry has not changed, but Israel has survived through the combination of intense motivation to restore national sovereignty - an equal place among the nations - and finding the necessary strategies and tactics, adapted in each period to changing threats.
- Israel's unique situation - a small and vulnerable country surrounded by many large and hostile neighbors - led to its ambiguous nuclear deterrent policy that has been in place since the 1960s and has received very broad support from all parts of the Israeli political spectrum. The policy has not changed in four decades despite major changes in the government, and can be expected to continue as long as rejection of Israel's legitimacy and threats to national survival continue.
- As the prospects of conventional attacks declined, threats from both ballistic missiles with non-conventional warheads and mass terror attacks increased. Both forms of attack and the asymmetries that they seek to exploit have been managed through a combination of defense, deterrence, and prevention. In looking toward the next decade, the need to prevent the radical Islamic regime in Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons presents the central challenge.
- Israel can look back on sixty years of warfare and terrorism with the knowledge that these threats have been overcome. Although this is not the peace and stability that Israel seeks, the Jewish state has survived to take its place as an equal member among the other nations of the world.

Overview

Sixty years ago, amid the stormy debates on partition and independence, few observers gave Israel much chance of survival. The small Jewish society faced a huge asymmetry in power, demography, and other factors. In relation to the Arab countries and Iran, Israel's very small territory (even after 1967), population, lack of natural resources (in comparison to the Arab and Iranian oil wealth), difficulty in obtaining weapons, and sensitivity to casualties were all disadvantages. From 1948 to the end of 2007, twenty-four thousand Israelis have been killed in wars and terror attacks - a very high price.¹ This asymmetry has not changed, but Israel has survived through the combination of intense motivation to restore national sovereignty - an equal place among the nations - and finding the necessary strategies and tactics, adapted in each period to changing threats.

The first phase, from 1948 to 1973, was marked primarily by large-scale clashes with the armies of the confrontation states - Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan. Israel emerged intact from these wars, and the high costs and Israel's ability to recover from the initial surprise attacks in the 1973 Yom Kippur War marked a turning point, in which the danger of such multifront conventional invasions declined (but did not disappear). Egypt entered the peace process and Syria was unable to launch major attacks on its own.

Since then the threats from both ballistic missiles with non-conventional warheads and mass terror attacks have increased. Both types of threats and the inherent asymmetries that they seek to exploit have been managed through a combination of defense, deterrence, and prevention. This strategic combination was employed successfully to defeat the Palestinian mass-terror and suicide-bombing campaign (the so-called Second Intifada) and highlighted the continued importance of territorial control and defensible borders.² Israeli deterrence was also central in bringing Egypt and Syria to limit their advances in the 1973 war, and in preventing Saddam Hussein from using chemical or biological warheads on the missiles launched in 1991.³ In contrast, the Lebanon wars of 1982 and 2006 and the ongoing warfare with Hamas in Gaza have demonstrated the challenges Israel faces in deterring and defending against rocket attacks launched from within a civilian population. And in looking toward the next decade, the need to prevent the radical Islamic regime in Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons presents the central challenge.

Defeating the Conventional Threat: 1947-1973

In 1947, as the United Nations debated the partition resolution, David Ben-Gurion and the Jewish leadership were primarily concerned about the Arab preparations to attack the new state immediately after the departure of the British forces. Azzam Pasha, secretary-general of the Arab League, boasted: "This will be a war of extermination and a momentous massacre which will be spoken of like the Mongolian massacres and the Crusades."⁴ As Yoav Gelber and other historians have shown, the nascent Jewish state "perceived the peril of an Arab invasion as threatening its very existence. Having no real knowledge of the Arab's true military capabilities, the Jews took Arab propaganda literally, preparing for the worst and reacting accordingly."⁵ Many American and European officials and experts agreed with the assessment that Israel would not survive a full-scale war. Arab hostility, and the extreme imbalance and asymmetry, were seen as overwhelming and insurmountable.

Israel's weakness and vulnerability to attack was and remains the result of its very small territory, as well as the absence of strategic depth (the territory necessary to conduct a retreat and prepare a counteroffensive).⁶ Furthermore, the population (six hundred thousand in May 1948) was also very small compared to the Arab states, and this image of weakness was reinforced as many Jews arrived directly from the European camps following the Holocaust. In contrast, the Arab states had much more territory, large populations (particularly Egypt), and standing armies, as well as huge oil resources to finance the purchase of weapons.

The war against Israel began immediately following the UN partition vote on November 29, 1947, with large-scale terrorism and other attacks in which over 1200 Jews were killed (20 percent of the total killed in the War of Independence), as well as many Arabs. In an ambush on the road to the Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem in April, seventy-nine Jewish medical personnel were murdered. Much of the local Arab effort (the term Palestinian was used at the time to describe both Jews and Arabs in the area of the mandate) focused on Jerusalem, and by April 1948 the Jewish Quarter of the Old City had largely been destroyed and the survivors were forced to leave. (In 1967, the Jewish presence in the Old City and access to the Temple Mount and other sacred sites were restored, and the houses and synagogues were rebuilt.)

The war expanded greatly on May 15, 1948, as British forces departed and the interstate dimension of the conflict began as the armies of Egypt, Syria, Jordan (the Arab Legion), and Iraq attacked from the air, including the bombing of Tel Aviv, and ground. These states' leaders expected a short war and easy victory. (Forces from Lebanon and Saudi Arabia were also engaged.) The real issue of concern for Arab leaders was the competition between them, and not the expectation that the new Israel Defense Forces (IDF) - which had been created

out of often warring militias (the Hagana, IZL, and others) - would pose a serious fighting capability.

Furthermore, Israel was isolated and without allies. Although the United States voted in favor of partition and the creation of a Jewish state, and President Truman overruled State Department advice and recognized Israel, Secretary of State George Marshall and Defense Secretary James Forrestal told Israeli leaders that the United States would not provide any military assistance. (The U.S. government even forced the first transport aircraft chartered to carry weapons from Europe to return to the United States.) In 1949, Britain and France joined Washington in the Tripartite Declaration, which formalized and expanded this boycott.

In contrast, the Arabs had a coalition and had powerful allies outside the region. The British equipped, trained, and led (through John Bagot Glubb) the Jordan Legion (or Arab Legion), which conquered, occupied, and annexed the West Bank and Jerusalem. The other Arab nations found different ways of obtaining weapons and evading the Tripartite Declaration. And when the U.S.-led Baghdad Pact was signed in 1955 as a Middle Eastern version of NATO, this opened the door to weapons and training for Iraq and other members.

Israel was able to obtain some ad hoc assistance, primarily from Czechoslovakia (Operation Balak), which sold (with Soviet support) much needed war-surplus weapons, including aircraft and rifles that were immediately transported to Israel. At that time the Soviet Union viewed the survival of an independent Israel as a means of weakening Western control of the Middle East. (Israel received weapons and technology from France in the 1950s via a similar ad hoc alliance.) These relatively minimal weapons stocks allowed the nascent IDF to defend many positions and to take the offensive elsewhere. Egyptian and Iraqi forces were stopped on the southern outskirts of Jerusalem and pushed back, and the IDF took territory in the Sinai. However, there were also defeats, including the loss of the Old City of Jerusalem, the Gush Etzion salient south of Jerusalem, and land along the border with Syria.

The costs of these military successes were very high. More than 6300 Israelis - 1 percent of the total population - were killed and many more were injured. Almost all families lost relatives - men and women - among the fighters, and one-third of the dead were civilians including children and the elderly.

But overall, the soldiers drafted into the IDF, some immediately upon arrival as refugees from the Holocaust, fought tenaciously and emerged victorious, using the available weapons with a high level of motivation. The widely shared core goals of independence, freedom, sovereign equality, and national survival formed the basis of this motivation. Israel's Jews from all sectors, including ultra-Orthodox (*haredi*), realized that after two thousand years of exile, anti-Semitism, and inhuman violence this was the first and probably only chance for the Jewish people to return to their ancient homeland and preserve their culture, language, and literature. Sovereignty and the return to the world stage as a nation like other nations was an objective that excited almost all Jews, and many came to volunteer, ready to risk their lives for this common goal. For Holocaust survivors arriving in Israel, self-defense was the diametric opposite of the Nazi death camps.

Israel's limited access to weapons was offset by a high level of innovation and leadership. In place of artillery, which was not available, Israel invented a home-made weapon known as the Davidka, and when Palestinian forces ambushed convoys and closed the road from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, an alternative route, known as the Burma Road, was carved out. Israel's young officers - Yitzhak Rabin, Yigal Allon, Uzi Narkis, and others - devised creative tactics to defeat the Arab attacks. They moved troops and weapons quickly from battle to battle, exploiting local weaknesses in Arab deployments and often using surprise to gain advantage.

In contrast, the Arabs were poorly prepared and led. Their leaders believed the Jews would not fight, and if they did, the new Jewish state lacked the resources and capabilities to defend its territory. These leaders were also corrupt, and many were overthrown after the defeat. As a result, when the Arab states agreed to a ceasefire the intention was to gain time so as to begin training, acquiring new weapons, and developing better leadership. Although the Armistice Agreements and various UN resolutions included clauses pledging all the parties to negotiations designed to result in a permanent peace, most Arab leaders refused to negotiate directly with Israel or to recognize the legitimacy of a Jewish state on any terms. They imposed total boycotts on Israel, blocked shipping through the Red Sea, and maintained a state of war on all fronts.

Post-1948 Security Strategy: Deterrence and Preemption

Ben-Gurion and other Israeli leaders understood that despite the successes of 1948, the basic asymmetries and vulnerabilities remained. The Arab threat of "another round" was real, and would seek to complete the objective of destroying Israel. The Israeli response emphasized deterrence and preemption, aimed at denying the Arabs this outcome and eventually forcing a settlement on terms that would ensure Israel's survival.

After the 1949 ceasefire agreements, Arab attacks took the form of terrorism and *fedayun* raids from Gaza (occupied by Egypt) and the West Bank (occupied by Jordan), as well as from Syria. In these attacks a number of Israelis were killed, and the IDF launched reprisals to create deterrence. Special forces such as Unit 101, led by Ariel Sharon, were set up. This, however, led to internal controversy particularly after Unit 101's Kibya raid in 1953, with some critics arguing that this approach increased Arab motivation to use terror rather than achieving deterrence.⁷

The deterrence strategy also led to the Dimona nuclear reactor complex, which was designed to convey the message that if Israel was faced with the possibility of destruction, the Arab countries would suffer the same fate. (See the detailed analysis of this dimension below.)

In 1955, the threat of another round, to be led by Egypt, increased. After the army overthrew the monarchy, Nasser moved quickly to modernize the armed forces, signing an agreement for Soviet weapons including modern aircraft and tanks to be supplied via Czechoslovakia. For Israel this was a major warning sign, and it led to the preventive attack during the 1956 Suez War, before Egypt could learn to use these weapons. When Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, angering the British and French, Ben-Gurion took advantage of having these coalition partners. (The alliance with France, which lasted until the months before the 1967 war, helped provide weapons and technology to Israel, including advanced jet aircraft and the construction of the Dimona reactor.)

The Israeli forces made quick progress on the ground in Sinai, defeating the Egyptian army, but when the United States and Soviet Union intervened and forced London and Paris to accept a ceasefire, Israel had no choice but to comply. Nasser and the Arabs saw this as an important demonstration of how military defeat could be overcome through political pressure from the superpowers. Israel agreed to withdraw from the Sinai in exchange for an American pledge to prevent Egypt from again blocking shipping through the Red Sea to the port of Eilat. But in 1967, when Nasser again closed this passage, the United States failed to respond.

1967: The Accidental War and Its Unforeseen Consequences⁸

As a military strategy, deterrence is never perfect and miscalculations can occur, as was the case in 1967. Neither Egyptian nor Israeli leaders planned this war, but a series of events and misunderstandings created the conditions that led to it.

After the Suez War, tension and low-intensity conflict continued, including terror attacks, with sporadic violence with Syria over diversion of water supplies. Internal problems in Egypt led Nasser to divert the attention of his population, and his formation of a united military command with Jordan and Syria increased Israeli concerns. In 1967, Nasser suddenly ordered the departure of UN peacekeeping troops in the Sinai (immediately implemented by the secretary-general), adding speeches threatening to "push the Jews into the sea." False Soviet warnings of Israeli plans for an attack augmented the instability, and Israel decided to call up its reserves and prepared for thirty thousand casualties, expecting a war that would be longer and even more costly than in 1948. (Some researchers have claimed that Egypt was also planning to attack Dimona, but the evidence for this is unclear.) Chief of Staff Rabin, who was responsible for dealing with this situation, collapsed from nervous exhaustion.

A national unity coalition was formed, including, for the first time, Herut leader Menahem Begin, and with Moshe Dayan as defense minister. Dayan and Rabin decided that to prevent the expected Arab strike, Israel would attack first, destroying the air forces of Syria, Egypt, and Iraq while ground forces advanced against the Egyptians in the Sinai. When King Hussein of Jordan decided to join the war, based on false Egyptian reports of success, and his army began to attack the Israeli parts of Jerusalem and elsewhere, Israel responded, evicting the Jordanian forces from the Old City of Jerusalem including the Jewish Quarter and the Temple Mount.

The war ended in six days leaving Israel in control of the West Bank (which had been occupied by Jordan), the Sinai (from Egypt), and the Golan Heights (from Syria). (The Iraqi troops arrived too late to make a difference, but they stayed in Jordan until 1970.) Israel went quickly from being seen as a tiny, endangered nation to the foremost regional power, and the Americans, who were bogged down in Vietnam, began to view the Jewish state as a strategic asset. U.S. weapons including tanks, advanced aircraft, electronics, and tactical missiles (air to ground, air to air, and other systems) were sold and later given to Israel as part of a wider alliance.

Furthermore, this victory, coming after the national depression and fear of attack, fostered confidence among many Israelis that the War of Independence had finally ended and the Arabs would have no choice but to accept Israel. The cabinet decided that in the case of Egypt and Syria, Israel would trade the captured land for recognition and peace agreements, and Israeli commentators spoke of Rabin waiting for a call from Nasser. The West Bank would also be under discussion with Jordan, but not the liberated parts of "reunified Jerusalem."

However, Nasser did not call, and in their humiliation the Arabs vowed to rebuild their arms and recapture the lost land. Meeting in Khartoum, Arab leaders adopted the "three no's" declaration - no recognition, no negotiations, and no peace with Israel.

On the ground, and despite losing control of the Suez Canal and the Sinai, Egypt recovered quickly, launching the War of Attrition less than two years later. The entry of the Cold War through the Israeli alliance with the United States opened the door for massive Soviet assistance to Egypt and Syria, leading not only to weapons transfers but the stationing of Soviet troops to help Cairo. In the War of Attrition, Russian pilots engaged Israelis flying American aircraft and the conflict became a proxy war between the superpowers. (A number of Russian pilots were shot down.) But Israel also suffered growing casualties on the front lines and, as Nasser understood, its small population could not sustain an attrition war. In

1970, the United States brokered a ceasefire on terms that were less than favorable to Israel and set the stage for the 1973 surprise attack.

1973: Exhaustion, the Changing Conventional Threat, and Peace with Egypt

In October 1973, the Egyptian and Syrian armies launched a highly successful surprise attack, penetrating Israeli defense lines and inflicting heavy losses. This attack took place on Yom Kippur, the most sacred day of the year for the Jewish people, when most Israelis were fasting and in synagogue for prayers. The Arab coalition enjoyed overwhelming quantitative superiority in conventional forces over Israel, particularly before the completion of the IDF's reserve mobilization. In the initial attack, Syria deployed 1400 tanks from the front lines and extending to Damascus, while Israel only had 177 tanks on the Golan at that time - an 8-1 armor advantage for Syria.

In contrast to 1967, Israel decided against a preventive air attack as signs of the Arab offensive became clear a few hours before it began. Israel took a number of days to recover and to deploy its reserve forces. As the Soviet Union mounted a massive resupply effort to Egypt and Syria, Israel, which had lost many aircraft and tanks in the initial attacks, turned to the United States for replacements. With these weapons Israel was able to launch a counteroffensive, led by Ariel Sharon, whose forces crossed the Suez Canal, encircled the Egyptian Third Army, and began to move toward Cairo.

On the Syrian front, the IDF recaptured the Golan Heights and expanded the area under its control. At this stage the United States, working through the United Nations, negotiated a ceasefire agreement. Israeli forces were entwined with the Egyptian army in Sinai and the situation was very complex. To resolve these issues Egyptian and Israeli officers began to communicate directly, and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger traveled back and forth between Cairo and Jerusalem.

The thousands of deaths on all sides, the high economic costs, and the stalemate that ended the war without a clear victor changed the nature of the security environment for Israel. In preparing for this war, Egypt and Syria had used all their available resources and this was the best that could be achieved. Egypt, in particular, had regained honor lost in the previous wars, and President Sadat could now negotiate peace without humiliation. The direct talks between Egyptian and Israeli officials opened a channel of communication that led to a disengagement agreement. (In contrast, the Syrian regime still refused to talk to Israelis, and the agreements on this front all resulted from Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy.) These talks continued and led to a second disengagement agreement in 1975, and in 1977, to Sadat's acceptance of Begin's invitation and the historic visit to Jerusalem, followed in 1979 by a peace treaty.

As a result of these events, Egypt ended its role as the leader of the anti-Israeli coalition. Without Egypt, a large-scale Arab conventional attack against Israel, involving only Syria and Iraq (and perhaps Jordan), became more difficult, and after the 1973 conflict, there have been no additional large-scale attacks involved division-sized formations and massive armored forces. But the conventional threat to Israel has not disappeared, and the IDF continued to face major force asymmetries, and the need to deter hostile armies. At the same time, the priorities of Israeli strategists evolved as new security challenges became more prominent. These developments fundamentally changed the Israeli security environment.

Low-Intensity War and Terrorism: The Emergence of the PLO

Although such large-scale warfare between armies ended after 1973, the role of terrorism and low-intensity conflict was increasing. Terrorist attacks were a constant part of the anti-Israeli violence from the 1920s, and continued during and after the War of Independence but with relatively low impact.

This began to change in 1964 with the founding of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). After the 1967 war the PLO, under Yassir Arafat, gradually increased its attacks against Israel. Most of these were launched from the West Bank and Gaza, which had come under Israeli control. This provided easier access to Israeli cities, including Jerusalem where a number of the attacks were perpetrated. By operating from within civilian areas and using schools, mosques, hospitals, and private homes, the terrorists had protection through human shields. Other groups, such as the PFLP and, later, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, contributed to this form of low-intensity warfare against Israel. It included airplane hijacking, bus bombings, kidnapping as in the case of the Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics in 1972, attacks on schools (such as Ma'alot on the Lebanese border in 1974, in which twenty-two children were killed), and other kinds of terror.

In response, Israeli security forces developed and applied antiterror tactics including interrogation, checkpoints, and punishments directed against terrorists and their families designed to deter such attacks. This was a different type of warfare, necessitating different training and weapons. Large tank formations and mobile ground forces were no longer required, and the mass army based on universal conscription (including women) could also be reduced.⁹

Following these Israeli measures, Arafat and the PLO moved much of their terror activities to Jordan and in September 1970 sought to overthrow the Jordanian government and the Hashemite monarchy. After this failed, Arafat and the PLO were forced out of Jordan and moved to Lebanon. They used it as a base for terror operations against Israel, contributing to the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war and the Syrian intervention. These later triggered the 1982 Lebanon War, in which the IDF forced the PLO to move its headquarters and base for attacks to Tunis.

In addition to deterrence, which used such tactics as expulsion of terrorists, their families, and supporters, the IDF also applied passive defensive measures at roads, airports, markets, schools, sports arenas, embassies, and other potential targets. In Europe and other areas where the Palestinians had easy access to Israeli targets, security increased (particularly around El Al aircraft, which ended hijackings), while Mossad "hit squads" sought out and killed Palestinians in Europe who had participated in attacks such as at the Munich Olympics. (In one case in Norway, a misidentification led to an attack against an individual who had not been involved, but such errors were unusual.)

In parallel, Israeli leaders ordered large-scale operations against PLO-controlled facilities. In Lebanon, Prime Minister Begin carried out Operation Litani in 1978, which sought to push the Palestinian presence away from the Israeli border. Israel also forged an alliance with the Christian Maronite forces in Lebanon as part of the effort to reduce the Palestinians' ability to use this territory for attacks against Israel. In 1982, following an attempted assassination of the Israeli ambassador to Britain, Israel launched a full-scale campaign including entry into Beirut and battles with the Syrian army that was occupying Lebanon. Arafat was forced to flee to Tunis, but Israel lost many more soldiers than expected and received a great deal of international condemnation.

Recognizing this advantage, Palestinian terrorism continued sporadically throughout the 1980s and 1990s, accompanying the "Oslo peace framework" that was signed in 1993. Under the Oslo terms, Israel agreed to the creation of a Palestinian Authority in parts of Gaza and

West Bank under Arafat's control, though there was growing competition from the Islamic-based Hamas movement. In 1995 and 1996, large-scale suicide bombings in Israeli cities were central in undermining Israeli support for this political process. In 2001, after the failure of the Camp David summit, the scale of suicide bombings increased in what the Palestinians call the "Second Intifada," with over one thousand Israeli deaths through 2005.

Israel, led by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, defeated this campaign through major counterattacks such as Operation Defensive Shield (2002) against terror centers such as Jenin. Israel retook control over the areas that were transferred to the Palestinians in the Oslo framework, and isolated Arafat, preventing him from directing and funding the attacks. Targeted killing of major terror leaders from the different organizations forced the others to invest resources in hiding and defending themselves, reducing the terror attacks further. And a formidable separation barrier was constructed around much of the West Bank and all of Gaza, making infiltration more difficult and further decreasing the attacks. This barrier highlights the importance of defensible borders in any peace negotiations, as stipulated in UN Security Council Resolution 242.

In 2005, Israel attempted to encourage cooperation by removing all of its military and civilian presence from Gaza. In 2007, however, Hamas took control there from the weakened PLO and the smuggling of weapons and explosives from Egypt increased greatly. As a result over two thousand rockets were launched against Israel in this period, and in 2008 Israel returned to a policy of punishment and deterrence including targeted killings of leaders.

In analyzing this history, Israel cannot be said to have won a total victory over Palestinian terror campaigns, and the efforts, including occasional suicide bombings, continue. This limited result can be explained by the political environment and the role of "soft power," which created hatred for Israel and support for the Palestinian cause. As a result Israeli counterterror operations were portrayed in the media as "disproportionate," particularly when Palestinian civilians were accidentally killed or injured, and condemned by political groups that use human rights rhetoric such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as in the Arab-dominated United Nations.¹⁰ In addition, Arafat's political skills and ability to portray the Palestinians as the weak victims, particularly in Europe,¹¹ and the growing anti-Israeli ideology, restricted the ability of Israel's security forces to take strong action against terrorism.

Israel's Ambiguous Deterrent

Israel's unique situation - a small and vulnerable country surrounded by many large and hostile neighbors - led to its ambiguous nuclear deterrent policy, which has been in place since the 1960s and has received very broad support from all parts of the Israeli political spectrum. The development began after the War of Independence, in which, as noted, 1 percent of the population was killed. Ben-Gurion understood that the attempt to destroy Israel would only end when the Arabs realized it could not be done without leading to their own destruction. To create this "balance of fear," Ben-Gurion began the program to acquire a nuclear deterrent as a "weapon of last resort," based on the small reactor in Dimona, built in cooperation with France in the late 1950s.

For many years the United States pressed Israel to stop this effort by signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and opening Dimona to international inspection, but Israeli leaders refused in the recognition that an independent deterrent was essential. In 1969, a compromise was reached under which Israel agreed not to declare or test a weapon. This formula, which reduced the friction significantly, has lasted up to 2008 though different U.S. leaders have occasionally resumed pressure on Israel.¹²

For forty years Israel has maintained this policy of nuclear ambiguity and, unlike the other eight known nuclear weapons states, Israel has never tested or declared itself to be a nuclear power. It has never threatened its neighbors with destruction other than in response to such declarations aimed at Israel, as are now frequently heard from Iranian leaders such as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In this and other ways the Israel nuclear posture is unique and exceptional, and this is also recognized by some international officials who focus on nuclear weapons proliferation.¹³

This insurance policy has been very successful. In the 1973 war, Egypt carefully limited its forces to efforts to recapture territory lost in 1967 and made sure to avoid threatening Israel's national survival. In the first few days of the war, and of setbacks to conventional forces, Israeli leaders feared the destruction of the "Third Temple" and reportedly uncovered some nuclear missiles to remind Egypt and Syria (as well as the United States and the Soviet Union) of this capability. In 1991, Saddam Hussein did not use chemical or biological warheads to attack Israel but restricted the Scud missiles to conventional warheads that did relatively little damage.

The nuclear deterrent capability is also widely credited with having brought Egypt to the peace table by demonstrating that the goal of defeating and destroying Israel is impossible without risking national self-destruction. It should be noted that in Israel, public opinion polls consistently show that over 80 percent of the population support the current policy of nuclear ambiguity. The policy has not changed in four decades despite major changes in the government, and can be expected to continue as long as rejection of Israel's legitimacy and threats to national survival continue.

Although Israel's invisible deterrent has helped to promote regional stability, Iraq and Libya sought to acquire nuclear weapons during this period. The Iraqi program under Saddam Hussein began in the 1970s and was aided by membership in the NPT and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). (Unlike Iraq, Iran, Libya, and Syria, Israel is not a signatory to the 1970 NPT, has not received any "civilian" assistance in producing weapons, and has not violated any commitments.) The Iraqi weapons development program, including the French-built Osiraq reactor, was not declared to the IAEA nor placed under any inspection system.

In 1981, after the failure of Israeli diplomatic efforts to focus the attention of American and European leaders on the illicit Iraqi nuclear weapons program, the Israeli air force attacked and destroyed the reactor, crossing Saudi territory en route. This preserved the Israeli nuclear monopoly for many more years, and highlighted the weakness of the international nonproliferation safeguards and inspection systems. The "Begin Doctrine" declared that no country in the region that maintains a state of war against Israel can be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons.

This was not the only example; twenty-six years later, on September 6, 2007, the Israeli air force destroyed what is now known to have been a North Korean-built nuclear reactor that was nearing completion in Syria. Once again, the NPT and IAEA had failed to prevent blatant proliferation, and the Begin Doctrine was invoked.

The Israeli hope is that at some point the fanaticism and hatred will end, the countries in the region will stop attempting to "push the Jews into the sea," and an effective nuclear-weapons-free zone will be implemented.

Facing the Iranian Threat

In the 1990s, other countries in the region acquired weapons of mass destruction, including Syria (with chemical and perhaps biological weapons), Libya (whose leader relinquished these capabilities in 2003 following the U.S. attack on Iraq), and most important, Iran. In 2006, the IAEA acknowledged the discovery that Iran had been lying for eighteen years while seeking components and information for use in nuclear programs that were not reported as required under the NPT. Iran was found to be in noncompliance and, after long negotiations needed to overcome Chinese and Russian reluctance, the UN Security Council imposed a series of sanctions. This international action was late and, at least to date, has been ineffective.

The Iranian regime, which has become the leader of the anti-Israeli and anti-Western "rejectionists," also supports Hamas and Hizbollah and, through them, could easily become involved in a nuclear crisis with Israel.¹⁴ The activities and declarations of Iranian leaders, including promotion of Holocaust denial and open declarations of intent to "wipe Israel off the map" emphasize these dangers, which are combined with the growing military capabilities. The absence of any form of communication with Teheran highlights the ease with which a crisis could erupt and the obstacles to stable mutual deterrence. In addition, the Iranian missiles (acquired through North Korea), which can be armed with nuclear warheads, are capable of reaching Israel, Turkey, and Europe.

Based on the Begin Doctrine and both the Osiraq and Syrian precedents, it is possible that if no other means are found to prevent Iran from crossing the red line in developing nuclear weapons, Israel may be forced to take action. There are of course major dangers of Iranian retaliation, but not acting may be seen as more dangerous for Israeli survival. Alternatively, Israel may decide to strengthen its deterrence capability if this is seen as a feasible and less costly strategy.

The Iranian threat and the continuing terror attacks from Iran's allies, Hamas and Hizbollah, demonstrate that after sixty years the Israel security environment remains dangerous and unstable. But Israel can also look back on sixty years of warfare and terrorism with the knowledge that each of these threats has been held back and Israel has thrived. Egypt and Jordan have signed peace treaties, Syria has been successfully deterred from further major attacks, and Arafat's terror campaigns were defeated. Israel must still be prepared to deal with all the types of military threats it has faced in the past - conventional war and terrorism - while taking into account new long-range threats that are still on the horizon. Although this is not the peace and stability that Israel seeks, the Jewish state has survived to take its place as an equal member among the other nations of the world.

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Notes

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