Falling Towers

by Louis René Beres (January 2016)

Falling towers/ Jerusalem Athens/ Alexandria Vienna London/ Unreal
(T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land)*

Israel must brace itself against intermittent waves of more-or-less orchestrated Palestinian terror.[1] It would first seem sensible, therefore, to orient the country's national security attention toward most effectively limiting these ongoing and still-anticipated crimes of violence. Nonetheless, terrorism and war are never mutually exclusive, and Jerusalem must also be careful not to deflect any core planning attention from more plainly existential perils.

In essence, authentically core survival dangers stem from a prospectively expanding prospect of regional conflict involving weapons of mass destruction. Such a daunting and many-sided scenario could involve both state and sub-state adversaries, perhaps in calculated concert with one another. At some point, these fundamentally different types of enemy could collaborate in unorthodox fashion, including even a determined attack on Israel's *Dimona* nuclear reactor.

Already, in 1991 and 2014, *Dimona* came under missile and rocket fire from Iraqi and Hamas aggressions, respectively.[2]

Escalation dominance

Now, the key question arises: How shall Israel best respond? While pertinent security threats could be intersecting, interpenetrating, or even synergistic, there will still remain a decipherable hierarchy of plausible dangers. Once this particular rank-ordering has been expressly identified, as indeed it must, Israel's policy planners will then need to ensure that the Jewish state remains situated in an optimal position to control escalation — if need be, from any one level of possible engagement, to any other.

In the more usual strategic military parlance, this means that Jerusalem must always seek to preserve a conspicuously viable posture of *escalation dominance*.

There is more. As part of this essential preservation process, Israel's defense

officials should consciously ensure that the country's various "layered" systems of deterrence, defense, preemption, and war-fighting protections are: 1) mutually reinforcing, and 2) simultaneously oriented toward both national and terror-group foes.

These officials must also learn to recognize the myriad and complex or cross-cutting alignments already being forged between Israel's diverse enemies. For example, at present, Jerusalem might still prefer the proximity of ISIS-related foes in the region, to Syrian and Iranian-supported Hezbollah, backed by Moscow. But this preference could sometime change in short order, especially if the ISIS-brand fighters should begin to more actively vie with Hamas, Fatah, and/or Islamic Jihad terrorists over Jordan and "Palestine."[3] Further, in rendering all such preference calculations, Jerusalem will also need to take into account the hardening new bipolarity of "Cold War II."

For the moment, Israel has correctly cast its security lot with Egypt's General al-Sisi, acting (singly or cooperatively) against Jihadists in the Sinai. Over time, however, there could be yet another change of power in Cairo, and perhaps even at a moment when Egypt had embarked upon acquiring nuclear weapons status.

Then, looking back at the evolution of nuclear weapons development in Shiite Iran, from the Shah to the ayatollahs, Egypt could begin to look very much like "*déjà vu* all over again."

For Israel, the overriding security mandate is not hard to figure out. Security planning officials must consistently look in several different strategic directions at once, and to make further and continuous judgments about (1) expected axes of conflict, and (2) corresponding opportunities to create "force multipliers."[4] These vital judgments, in turn, would involve mutually supportive applications of technology, both for maximizing Israeli deterrent effectiveness, and for ensuring Israel's indispensable superiority in cyber-defense and cyber-war. IDF and MOD planners are already keenly aware of these responsibilities, and are likely well ahead of Israel's adversaries on such competitive dimensions of military progress.

What is not altogether certain, *inter alia*, is that the critical *intellectual* resources needed to combat existential threats are being directed in suitably existential policy directions. In the final analysis,

Israel's physical survival will demand a substantial triumph of "mind over mind," not just of "mind over matter." This notion of a required primacy of intellect in war is not in any way new or contemporary. It was, in fact, already understood by Greek and Macedonian armies more than two thousand years ago.[5]

"In a dark time," says the American poet, Theodore Roethke, "the eye begins to see." Today, in threatening an insidiously encroaching "darkness," the enemy nuclear challenge should be starkly visualized and fully acknowledged in Israel. Israel's preemption prospects are essentially disappearing, and Jerusalem also understands that the *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action* (JCPOA) of 14 July 2015 (the Iran Pact) was little more than a combined American and European strategic failure.

Every state's first obligation is the assurance of protection. Always, following Hugo Grotius, the seventeenth-century founder of modern international law, innocent civilian life must be preserved.[6] From the moment that Iranian leaders first proclaimed their unwavering belief in a Shiite apocalypse, a series of final battles believed to be a *sine qua non* for transforming the profane "world of war" (*Dar al-Harb*) into the sacred "world of Islam," (*Dar al-Islam*), Jerusalem has had to affirm and confront every conceivable military peril, and, reciprocally, to consider every conceivably purposeful remedy.

Bombs in the basement

Israel should continue to remind the world that nuclear weapons states are not created equal. Israel's nuclear forces remain deliberately ambiguous and undeclared. This is not for any reasons of legal deception or subterfuge. On the contrary, these "bombs in the basement" have never been brandished in any threatening fashion by Israel's civilian or military leaders. This non-belligerent national strategic posture is evident, *prima facie*. It is, therefore, incontestable.

Israel is not Iran. Israel has never called for wiping any other state "off the map." Israel's nuclear weapons exist only to protect the Jewish state from certain extraordinary forms of aggression.

Quite literally, these nuclear weapons serve only to prevent another Jewish genocide,[7] and also various corollary crimes against humanity.[8] Should Israel ever yield to intermittently incessant pressures to join the 1968 *Nuclear*

Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), it might as well sign its own collective death warrant.[9]

Significantly, in authoritative law, war and genocide need not be mutually exclusive. Reciprocally, Israel's nuclear deterrent force would never be used except in defensive reprisal for certain massive enemy first strikes. In practice, this means enemy attacks involving nuclear, and/or particular kinds of biological weapons.

For the time being, none of Israel's enemies is nuclear, but, of course, this relatively benign status of adversaries could change rapidly. In this connection, the *JCPOA* will have no meaningful inhibiting effects upon Iranian nuclearization, and its apparent inadequacies could also encourage, perhaps in the somewhat longer-term, certain reciprocal Sunni state nuclearizations.

If the day comes

If, one day, it should actually have to face genuinely nuclear enemies, Shiite and/or Sunni, Israel could then choose to rely upon threatening its own nuclear weapons to reduce the risks of unconventional war and destruction, but only insofar as the newly-nuclear enemy state or states, would (1) remain rational; and (2) remain convinced that Israel would retaliate "nuclearly" if attacked with nuclear, and/or other devastating (biological) weapons.

There is something else. The world is already caught up in a second Cold War. This "Cold War II" between Russia and the United States, coinciding with an expanding regional chaos, could (1) effectively "re-test" earlier expressions of superpower nuclear deterrence; and (2) directly impact Israel's critical power position in the region.[10] The impact on Israeli safety and security of this new era of "bipolarity"[11] could stem from more-or-less unexpected directions, including a potentially devastating diminution or disappearance of U.S. military power from the Middle East.

Whether for reasons of miscalculation, accident, unauthorized capacity to fire, outright irrationality, or the presumed imperatives of "*Jihad*," an enemy state in this fevered neighborhood could sometime opt to launch a nuclear first-strike against Israel, in spite of the Jewish State's own secure and recognizable nuclear capability.[12] In essence, a Cold War I type of "Mutual Assured Destruction" (a so-called "balance of terror") might not be reproducible in a

proliferating Middle East.[13] This conclusion could be even more distressing if the region should remain in the disconcertingly fevered grip of a steadily expanding *chaos*.[14]

After any enemy nuclear aggression, Israel would respond with a nuclear retaliatory strike. Although nothing is publicly known about Israel's precise targeting doctrine, such a reprisal would probably be launched against the aggressor's capital city, and/or against similarly high-value urban targets. There could be no ascertainable assurances, in response to this sort of potentially genocidal aggression, that Israel would limit itself to striking back against exclusively military targets.

What if enemy first strikes were to involve "only" chemical and/or "minor" biological weapons? In that case, Israel might still launch a presumptively proportionate nuclear reprisal, but this choice would depend largely upon Israel's own antecedent expectations of follow-on aggression, and on its associated determinations of comparative damage-limitation. Should Israel absorb "only" a massive conventional first-strike, a nuclear retaliation could not be ruled out.

This sobering conclusion is plausible, so long as: (1) the aggressor were perceived to hold nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction in reserve; and/or (2) Israel's leaders were to believe that non-nuclear retaliations could not prevent national annihilation*. In this connection, recognizing Israel's small size, the calculated threshold of existential harms would be determinably much lower than Israel's total physical devastation*.

Facing imminent existential attacks, Israel could decide to preempt enemy aggression with certain conventional forces. The targeted state's response would then determine Israel's subsequent moves. If this response were in any way nuclear, Israel would assuredly undertake some form or other of nuclear counter-retaliation.

If this enemy retaliation were to involve chemical and/or biological weapons, Israel might also plan a quantum escalatory initiative. This particular sort of *escalation dominance* could be required for the secure preservation of Israel's intra-war deterrent.

If an enemy state's response to an Israeli preemption were limited to hard-

target conventional strikes, it is improbable that Israel would resort to nuclear counter-retaliation. But if the enemy state's conventional retaliation were an all-out strike directed toward Israel's civilian populations, as well as to certain Israeli military targets, an Israeli nuclear counter-retaliation could not be excluded. Such a counter-retaliation could be ruled out only if the enemy state's conventional retaliations were entirely proportionate to Israel's preemption; confined entirely to Israeli military targets; circumscribed by the legal limits of *"military necessityIsrael National News*.

_____

Louis René Beres (Ph.D., Princeton, 1971) is Emeritus Professor of Political Science and International Law at Purdue. He is the author of many books and articles dealing with terrorism, international relations, international law, art, literature, and philosophy. Professor Beres' recent articles on war and strategy were published in the *Harvard National Security Journal* (Harvard Law School), *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs,* and *Parameters: Journal of the U.S. Army War College.* His columns have appeared in several dozen major publications, including *The New York Times*