

# Israel's Nuclear Strategy: The Importance of Doctrine

by Louis René Beres (February 2015)

Oddly, perhaps, especially at a time of expanding existential peril, Israel has yet to make any substantive policy disclosures about its nuclear deterrent. To be sure, two former prime ministers, during their respective governing tenures, exhibited substantial “slips of the tongue” on this sensitive issue. Nonetheless, no purposefully explicit or meaningfully nuanced strategic details were ever disclosed by Premiers Shimon Peres or Ehud Olmert. Always, the bomb remained deliberately vague and obscure, still carefully well-hidden in the country’s metaphoric “basement.”

Even today, with an apt regard for specific Israeli policies, key components, and operational details, everything nuclear is shrouded in “*deliberate ambiguity*.” For Jerusalem, everything nuclear continues to be “opaque.” This is policy.

But is this policy *smart*?

On its face, the continuing Israeli commitment to a nuclear *status quo* does seem to make sense. After all, at least at the most obvious security levels, Israel’s usual state adversaries remain reluctant to launch any new major wars. Strategic planners, therefore, are entitled to ask: “Why rock the boat?”

Whatever Jerusalem chooses to say or not say, every conceivable adversary is already convinced that Israel has nuclear weapons. Indeed, to believe otherwise, at this point, would be preposterous. Also, U.S. President Barack Obama, plainly less than a fan of Israel’s key decision-makers, would likely object to any tangible disclosures of Israel’s nuclear posture. Such disclosures, it seems clear, could prove problematic for Washington.

There is more. The United States, either wittingly, or in conspicuous reaction to certain foreign government expectations, might react to any incremental Israeli nuclear disclosures by pressuring Jerusalem to join the 1968 *Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT)*. In this continuing matter, it is worth recalling, President Barack Obama has never pulled back discernibly from his oft-stated preference for “a world free of nuclear weapons.”

For Israel, this is a potentially injurious preference. Instead, for the Jewish State, the

authentically durable mantra ought to be: *Si vis pacem, para bellum atomicum*. "If you want peace, prepare for nuclear war." Plainly, Mr. Obama has yet to think through the bewilderingly complex dialectics of uncertainty in a denuclearizing world. For its part, and simply to "stay alive," Israel must plan reluctantly, but also recognizably, for nuclear war.

In the end, Israel could not long endure without nuclear weapons. Assuredly, these weapons are not needed primarily for the purpose of any actual war fighting, but rather for protracted strategic *deterrence*. Or, in the considered words of the *Project Daniel* final report, *Israel's Strategic Future* (2004): "The primary point of Israel's nuclear forces must always be deterrence *ex ante*, not revenge *ex post*."

Soon, there may arise a distinctly overriding reason for taking the bomb out of the "basement." This reason would be the inevitably complex requirements of maintaining a *credible nuclear deterrence posture*. To present such an essential posture, Israel's nuclear weapons, *inter alia*, will always need to appear sufficiently invulnerable to preemptive destruction by all would-be adversaries.

These nuclear weapons will also need to be seen as "*penetration capable*" (recognizably able to hit their intended targets) and "*usable*" (able to be taken seriously, that is, as a plausible retaliation for certain enemy aggressions). If any of these particular enemy perceptions were absent, Israel's nuclear weapons might not be taken with sufficient seriousness to serve as a sustainably credible deterrent. This could be the case, moreover, even though their physical existence and destructiveness would appear altogether obvious.

For Israel's nuclear weapons to protect against massive enemy attacks, some of which could sometime be genuinely existential in magnitude, Israel now needs to *refine, operationalize, and possibly declare* certain precise elements of its *strategic doctrine and associated ordnance*. Such action would be needed, *among other things*, to enhance deterrence credibility along the entire spectrum of major security threats, and also to provide Israel with broad conceptual frameworks from which particular decisions and tactics could be suitably extrapolated.

In principle, the especially urgent problems now associated with a steadily nuclearizing Iran should not have to be addressed by Israel on a case-by-case or *ad hoc* basis. Rather, Israel should stay prepared to fashion its best available response to the unprecedented Iranian nuclear threat within the broader and more coherent context of an antecedent *strategic theory*. In all fields, including strategic studies, theory is a "*net*." Only those who cast, will catch.

From Plato's time onward, dialectical thinking has required the disciplined asking and answering of certain questions. It follows that to shape its necessary *strategic doctrine*, Israel should promptly address the following absolutely core questions:

*Shall Israel begin to openly identify certain general elements of its nuclear arsenal and nuclear plans? If so, how?*

*Would it be in Israel's best security interest to make certain others aware, at least in general terms, of its nuclear targeting doctrine; its retaliatory and counter-retaliatory capacities; its willingness under particular conditions to preempt; its willingness under particular conditions to undertake nuclear reprisals; and its corollary capacities for ballistic missile defense? If so, to what extent?*

A simple Arab/Islamic awareness of the Israeli bomb can never automatically imply that Israel maintains a truly *credible nuclear deterrent*. If, for example, Israel's nuclear arsenal were seen as vulnerable to enemy first-strikes, it still might not persuade certain enemy states to resist attacking the Jewish State. Similarly, if Israel's political leadership were seen as unwilling to resort to nuclear weapons in reprisal for anything but unconventional and fully exterminatory strikes, these enemy states might also not be deterred.

If Israel's nuclear weapons were seen as uniformly too large, too destructive, and too indiscriminate for any rational use, deterrence could fail. And if Israel's targeting doctrine were seen as too predominantly "counterforce," that is, targeted exclusively or even primarily, on enemy state weapons with supporting military infrastructures, would-be attackers might then not anticipate sufficiently high expected costs. They might, in consequence, not be deterred.

As was acknowledged in the 2004 *Project Daniel* final report, *Israel's Strategic Future*, a presumptive counter-force targeting doctrine could also be damaging to Israel, here, because it could enlarge the probabilities of nuclear war fighting. Always, we must recall, Israel's nuclear weapons should be oriented toward deterrence, and never to actual conflict. With this in mind, Israeli planners and leaders (in stark contrast to the recent nuclear military planning operationalized in Pakistan) have likely opted not to build or deploy tactical/theatre nuclear forces.

If Israel's targeting doctrine were judged to be too predominantly "counterforce," enemy states could so fear an Israeli first-strike that they would then consider more seriously striking first themselves. This more-or-less reasonable scenario would represent, in effect, a *preemption of the preemption*, an ironic situation, a *danse macabre* wherein the intended

object of *anticipatory self-defense* (the proper legal term for any permissible preemption) would itself strike "*defensively*."

The dialectical dynamics of any such strategic calculations are hideously complex. In this connection, aware of the *counter-city/counterforce* options and implications, Israel's leaders should quickly determine the most favorable means and levels of any prospective nuclear disclosure. *How shall enemy states best be apprised of Israel's targeting doctrine, so that these particular adversaries could be deterred from all forms of both first-strike and retaliatory strike action?*

Here is the strategic bottom line: To ensure long-term survival of Israel, it can never be sufficient that Israel's enemies merely *know* that the Jewish State *has* nuclear weapons. They must also be convinced, always, that these atomic arms are sufficiently secure and usable, and that Israel's designated leadership is determinedly *willing* to launch them in response to certain first-strike and/or retaliatory aggressions.

No enemy state should ever be allowed to assume that Israel could be massively attacked with impunity.

Always, Israel's strategic doctrine must aim at strengthening nuclear deterrence. Jerusalem can meet this utterly core objective only by convincing enemy states that a first-strike upon Israel will always be irrational. More precisely, this means successfully communicating to enemy states that the costs of any such strike will always exceed the benefits.

Without exception, Israel's strategic doctrine must convince prospective attackers that their intended victim has both the *willingness* and the *capacity* to retaliate with nuclear weapons. Where an enemy state considering an attack upon Israel were somehow unconvinced about either or both of these fundamental components of nuclear deterrence, it could still choose rationally to strike first. Of course, this would depend, at least in part, upon the particular value it had originally placed upon the expected consequences of any such attack.

Regarding *willingness*, even if Israel were fully prepared to respond to certain Arab/Islamic attacks with nuclear reprisals, any residual enemy failure to actually recognize such preparedness could provoke an attack upon Israel. Misperception and/or errors in information could quickly immobilize Israeli nuclear deterrence. It is also conceivable that Israel would, in fact, simply lack the willingness to retaliate, and that this damaging lack of willingness were perceived correctly by enemy state decision-makers. In this very worrisome case, Israeli nuclear deterrence would be immobilized, not because of any confused signals, but because of signals that had not been suitably distorted.

Regarding *capacity*, even if Israel were to maintain a substantial arsenal of nuclear weapons, it is essential that enemy states will always believe these weapons to be distinctly usable. This means that if a first-strike attack were ever believed capable of sufficiently destroying Israel's atomic arsenal and associated infrastructures, that country's nuclear deterrent could conceivably be immobilized. To best guard against any such perilous eventuality, Jerusalem would be well-advised to continue working closely at improving all viable and affordable submarine nuclear basing options.<sup>1</sup>

Even if Israel's nuclear weapons were configured such that they could not be destroyed by an enemy first-strike, enemy misperceptions or misjudgments about Israeli vulnerability could still bring about the catastrophic failure of Israeli nuclear deterrence. A further complication here concerns enemy state deployment of anti-tactical ballistic missiles, deployments which could contribute to an affirmative attack decision against Israel, by lowering the attacker's own expected costs.

The importance of usable nuclear weapons must also be examined from the standpoint of probable harms. Should Israel's nuclear weapons be perceived by a would-be attacker as uniformly too high-yield, or "city-busting" weapons, they might also fail to deter. In certain circumstances, successful nuclear deterrence could even vary inversely with perceived destructiveness, at least to a point. This does not mean that Israel should ever incline toward a nuclear war-fighting doctrine (it assuredly should *not*), but only that it must always be aware of possibly subtle or eccentric decisional correlations between successful nuclear deterrence, and enemy perceptions of nuclear destructiveness.

This brings us back to the over-all core importance of Israeli strategic doctrine. To the extent that this doctrine were to identify certain nuanced and graduated forms of reprisal – forms calibrating Israeli retaliations *somewhat* to particular levels of provocation – any disclosure of such doctrine could enhance Israeli nuclear deterrence. Without such disclosure, Israel's enemies would be kept guessing about the Jewish State's probable responses, a condition of persistent uncertainty that could possibly serve Israel's security for a while longer, but, at one time or another, could also fail altogether.

It is time for one final observation, one already familiar to Israeli strategic planners. All nuclear deterrence is contingent upon an assumption of enemy rationality. This means that in calculating deterrence, an enemy must always be assumed to value its continued physical survival more highly than any other preference, or combination of preferences. Where this assumption might be unwarranted, all deterrence "bets" could be off, and the would-be deterrer's own survival would likely depend upon certain apt forms of preemption, and/or

ballistic missile defense – that is, BMD displaying a near-perfect “reliability of intercept.”

In the relentlessly urgent matter of nuclear Iran, a peril that intersects synergistically with a broad variety of corollary terror threats in the region, Israel will soon have to decide whether that country could sometime be animated more by *Jihadist* visions of a Shiite apocalypse, than by the usual strategic considerations of national survival. This portentous prospect, one wherein Iran could effectively emerge as a *suicide-bomber in macrocosm*, is highly improbable, but it is not inconceivable.

*Credo quia absurdum*. “I believe because it is absurd.” Israel should never construct its overall strategic doctrine upon such an eccentric mantra, but it also ought not ignore this potentially insightful paradox. In the end, this means a core responsibility to plan carefully for long-term nuclear deterrence of a rational nuclear Iran, but also to simultaneously make preparations for dealing with an already nuclear Iran that might sometime value certain religious preferences even more highly than collective physical survival. By definition, any such residual preparations would have to include viable plans for threatening to obstruct those particular Islamic religious values that Tehran might determinably value more highly than any other national preference, or combination of such preferences.

In terms of nuclear deterrence, irrationality is not the same as madness. If properly understood, even an irrational national adversary can be deterred. For Israel, going forward, this means a more precise and obligatory understanding of Iran’s expected ordering of religious (Shiite Islamic) preferences.

As for any eleventh-hour Israeli resort to preemption or “anticipatory self-defense,” it would, of course, need to be undertaken before Iran became operationally nuclear. For the moment, this starkly alternative option to long-term nuclear deterrence remains logically possible, but also manifestly unlikely. In essence, at this late stage, the expected costs to Israel of any defensive first-strike would plausibly exceed the expected gains.

*Si vis pacem, para bellum atomicum* .“If you want peace, prepare for nuclear war.”

[1] See, on these options: 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.

First published in