

Nuclear Deterrence is a Deadly Game

by Louis René Beres (March 2015)

Traditionally, successful national strategies of deterrence require enemy rationality. In the absence of such rationality – that is, in those more-or-less residual circumstances where an enemy state would rank order certain values or preferences more highly than “staying alive” as a nation – deterrence is expected to fail. For those potentially more serious situations involving nuclear deterrence, the palpable consequences of any such failure could be starkly catastrophic, or even unprecedented.

It goes without saying that dealing with sub-state or terrorist adversaries presents a wholly different and potentially more hazardous set of nuclear deterrence problems. By definition, these kinds of adversaries don't have any national territories to protect and secure. Moreover, their ultimate objectives are increasingly apt to include “martyrdom,” a faith-driven preference that does not bode well for subjecting these proliferating foes to orthodox threats of retaliation. Today, of course, we are already dealing with ISIS and other apocalyptic death cults that will never conform to ordinary notions of decisional rationality in world politics.

What is true for individuals is sometimes also true for states. In the often-unpredictable theatre of modern world politics, a drama that routinely bristles with myriad debilitating absurdities, decisions that rest upon normal logic can quickly crumble before madness. Naturally, dangers may reach the most singularly portentous or even existential level when madness and a nuclear weapons capability come together.

These issues are not purely theoretical. Rather, they are profoundly real and current, especially in the deeply adversarial matter of Israel and Iran.¹ Because not a single member of the “international community” chose to demonstrate a willingness to undertake suitably preemptive action (“anticipatory self-defense,” in the formal language of law), Jerusalem may soon have to face an expressly genocidal Iranian nuclear adversary. A potentially “suicidal” enemy state in Iran, one animated by certain graphically precise visions of a Shiite apocalypse, cannot casually be wished away, or simply dismissed out of hand.

As Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, clearly understands, Iran's extant leadership,

and possibly even another successor government in Tehran, could, at some point, value Israel's physical destruction more highly than its own national survival. Should this happen, the "play" would almost certainly end very badly for all "actors."

Exeunt omnes.

Nonetheless, for the foreseeable future, Israel's ultimate source of national security will have to lie in sustained nuclear deterrence. Although still implicit or ambiguous, and not yet open, or disclosed, this Israeli "bomb in the basement" could sometime "crumble before madness." Here, in certain easily-imaginable instances involving enemy "madness," the results of any failed Israeli retaliatory threats could conceivably include collective annihilation.

Though the logic of deterrence has always required an assumption of rationality, history reveals the persistent fragility of any such understanding. Indeed, we already know only too well that nations can sometimes behave in ways that are consciously, or even conspicuously, self-destructive.

History may trump logic, and thus deserve pride of place. Mirroring the decisively unpredictable behavior of individual human beings, national leaders will sometimes choose to assign the very highest value to preferences other than collective self-preservation, a sort of *Gotterdammerung* or "Twilight of the Gods" scenario. Fortunately, until now, we haven't witnessed such a scenario involving nuclear weapons or doctrine.

Perhaps we ought to be reassured. For the moment, no single Iranian or Islamic national adversary of Israel would appear to be irrational or mad. Harsh enemy rhetoric notwithstanding, no such adversary appears ready to launch a major first-strike against Israel using weapons of mass destruction. For now, at least, the plausible expectation that any such aggression would elicit a devastating reprisal is enough to prevent an attack. To be sure, miscalculations or errors in information could still lead a perfectly rational enemy state to strike first, but this decision would not be the outcome of irrationality or madness. Always, in pertinent strategic thinking, judgments of rationality and irrationality must be rooted in prior intent.

In world politics, as everywhere else, all things move in the midst of death and in corollary hopes for immortality. Certain enemy states, most likely Iran, could one day decide that excising the "Jewish cancer" or, more generally, the "enemies of Allah," would be worth even the most staggering costs. From a purely military standpoint, this unambiguously genocidal prospect could still be reduced or avoided should Israel be willing to undertake eleventh-hour "hard target" preemptions. All things considered, however, any such once-reasonable

expressions of anticipatory self-defense are now very difficult or even impossible to imagine.²

Operationally, a meaningfully successful preemption is now almost assuredly beyond Israel's cumulative capabilities.

Virtually all critical Iranian nuclear assets have already been deeply hardened, widely dispersed, and substantially multiplied. For Israel, there would also be considerable political costs to any preemption. A preemptive attack, even one that would become an operational failure, would still elicit utterly overwhelming howls of public and diplomatic condemnation. Such deafening howls of execration would, in fact, be inevitable.

It is plausible that certain alternative forms of preemption, including assassination of nuclear scientists, and/or cyber defense/cyber-warfare, could still be useful and necessary, but it is also unlikely that any such options could permanently obviate more traditionally expedient resorts to massive military force.

A "bolt-from-the-blue" CBN (chemical, biological or even nuclear) attack upon Israel that is launched with the expectation of city-busting reprisals might not exhibit irrationality or madness. Within such an attacking state's particular ordering of preferences, any presumed religious obligation to annihilate the "Zionist Entity" could represent the overriding value. From the standpoint of the prospective attacker's decisional calculus, the expected benefits of producing such a blessedly apocalyptic annihilation would exceed the expected costs of any expected Israeli reprisal.

Judged from this critical analytic standpoint the standpoint of the would-be attacker – a seemingly "mad" attack decision could actually "make sense."

An enemy state with such explicitly-exterminatory orientations could effectively represent the individual suicide bomber in macrocosm. Whether we like it or not, it is a realistic and powerful image. Just as individual Jihadists (Shiite and Sunni) are now plainly willing to achieve personal "martyrdom," so might certain Jihadist states become willing to "sacrifice themselves" collectively.

Any Iranian or Arab leaders making the fateful decision to strike massively at Israel could be willing to make "martyrs" of their own people, but not of themselves. In this very "asymmetrical" scenario, it would be judged "acceptable" by these particular leaders to sacrifice more-or-less huge portions of their respective populations, but only while they, and presumably their own families, were able to flee expeditiously to a predetermined, albeit

still earth-bound, safe haven. Again, these leaders would find justification and comfort in the “knowledge” that the Islamic victims were now destined for a far better place.

In all world politics, there is no greater form of power than power over death.

In the Middle East, the promise of immortality remains overarching and incomparable.

What is Israel to do? It can no longer rely on even the most creative forms of preemption/anticipatory self-defense. It also can't very well choose to live, indefinitely, with determined theological enemies who might not always be reliably deterred by the more usual threats of retaliation, and who would themselves already be armed with assorted weapons of mass destruction. Understandably, living under a nuclear sword of Damocles could be more than most Israelis would be willing to endure.

Moshe Dayan once declared: “Israel must be seen as a mad dog; too dangerous to bother.” If Israel's enemies could all still be presumed to be rational, in the ordinary sense of valuing their physical survival more highly than any other preference, or combination of preferences, Jerusalem could soon begin, among other things, to exploit the strategic benefits of pretended irrationality. Recognizing that in certain strategic situations, it can be rational to feign irrationality, Israel could then work systematically to create appropriately more cautionary behavior among its relevant adversaries. In such cases, the threat of an Israeli resort to a “Samson Option” might be enough to dissuade an enemy first-strike.

Recalling Sun-Tzu, more explicit Israeli hints of “Samson” could indicate an impressively useful grasp of the ancient Chinese strategist's advice to diminish reliance on defense, and, instead, to “seize the unorthodox.” In this connection, it should not be forgotten that even Israel's highly-refined and interpenetrating systems of active defense could never achieve a 100% reliability of ballistic missile interception. Although not generally understood, the Arrow and related BMD systems are needed primarily to enhance Israeli nuclear deterrence (hard-point defense), and not for any large-scale soft-point defense of civilian populations.

What about Dayan's earlier advice? If Israel's relevant national adversaries, probably Iran, were presumptively irrational in the ordinary sense, there would likely be no real benefit to any assumed postures of pretended irrationality. This is the case because the more probable threat of any massive Israeli nuclear counterstrike linked in enemy calculations with irrationality would be no more compelling to Iran, or to any other enemy state, than if it were confronted by an expectedly rational State of Israel.

In other words, pretended irrationality can “work” only vis-à-vis fully rational adversaries.

Israel could benefit from a greater understanding of the “rationality of pretended irrationality,” but only in particular reference to expectedly rational enemy states. In those circumstances where such enemy states were presumed to be irrational, something else would be needed, something other than nuclear deterrence, preemption, and/or ballistic missile defense. Although many commentators and scholars still believe the answer to this quandary lies in certain diplomatic or political settlements, this time-dishonored belief is born largely of frustration.

Unquestionably, President Barack Obama’s plan for keeping Iran non-nuclear was naïve at best. It has already failed.

No meaningful political settlements can ever be worked out with enemies who openly seek Israel’s “liquidation,”³ a word that is still used commonly in many Arab and Iranian newspapers, web sites, and texts. Israel’s enemies are not concerned about land – not at all. Their incessant and lascivious “war” with Israel is still about only one thing. It is about God. It is about immortality.

Going forward, Israel must understand that irrationality need not mean madness. Even an irrational state leadership may have an instrumental, consistent, and transitive hierarchy of wants. The first deterrent task for Israel must be to identify this hierarchy among its several state enemies. Although these states might not be deterred from aggression by even the plausibly persuasive threat of massive Israeli retaliations, they might still be dissuaded by certain threats aimed at what they do hold to be most important.

What might be most important to Israel’s prospectively irrational state enemies, potentially even more important than their own physical survival as a state? One possible answer is the avoidance of certain forms of presumed apostasy, shame, and humiliation. This would include avoiding the potentially unendurable charge that they had somehow defiled their most sacred religious obligations. Another would be leaders’ strongly-preferred avoidance of their own violent deaths at the hand of Israel, deaths that could be attributable to Israeli strategies of “targeted killing,” and/or “regime-targeting.” In these cases, the particular Islamic leaders would not themselves have been persuaded by the usually compelling benefits of “martyrdom.”

This last suggestion could be problematic to the extent that, theologically, being killed by Jews for the sake of Allah ought doctrinally to be regarded as a distinct positive. Dying for the sake of Allah, we may recall, could be regarded in these leadership contexts as a clerically-blessed passport to immortality.

In the future, Israel will need to deal with both rational and irrational adversaries. These enemies, in turn, will be both state and sub-state actors. On occasion, Israel's leaders will also have to deal with various complex and subtle combinations of rational and irrational enemies, sometimes even simultaneously.

Ultimately, Israel must also prepare to deal with "nuclear madmen," both as terrorists, and as national leaders. But, first, it must fashion a suitable plan for dealing with nuclear adversaries who are neither mad, nor irrational. With such an imperative, Israel should now do everything possible to enhance its deterrence, preemption, defense, and war-fighting capabilities. This means, *inter alia*, enhanced and explicit preparations for certain "last resort," or "Samson" operations.

Concerning any prospective contributions to Israeli nuclear deterrence, recognizable preparations for a Samson Option could serve to convince certain would-be attackers that their anticipated aggression would not be gainful. This is especially true if such Israeli preparations were combined with certain levels of disclosure, that is, if Israel's "Samson" weapons were made to appear sufficiently invulnerable to enemy first-strikes, and if these weapons were identifiably "countervalue" (counter-city) in mission function.

The Samson Option, by definition, would be executed with countervalue-targeted nuclear weapons. It is likely that any such last-resort operations would come into play only after all Israeli counterforce options had already been exhausted.

Concerning the previously mentioned "rationality of pretended irrationality," Samson could enhance Israeli nuclear deterrence by demonstrating a national willingness to take existential risks, but this would hold true only if Israeli last-resort options were directed toward rational adversaries.

Concerning prospective contributions to preemption options, preparations for a Samson Option could convince Israeli leaders that their own defensive first-strikes would be undertaken with diminished expectations of unacceptably destructive enemy retaliations. This sort of convincing would depend, at least in part, upon antecedent Israeli government decisions on disclosure (that is, an end to "nuclear ambiguity"); on Israeli perceptions of the effects of disclosure on enemy retaliatory prospects; on Israeli judgments about enemy perceptions of Samson weapons' vulnerability; and on an enemy awareness of Samson's countervalue force posture. In any event, the optimal time to end Israel's bomb in the basement policy, and thereby replace "deliberate ambiguity" with appropriate forms of disclosure, will soon be at hand.

Similar to Samson's plausible impact upon Israeli nuclear deterrence, recognizable last-resort preparations could enhance Israeli preemption options by displaying a clear and verifiable willingness to accept certain existential risks. In this scenario, however, Israeli leaders must always bear in mind that pretended irrationality could become a double-edged sword. Brandished too flagrantly, and without sufficient nuance, any Israeli preparations for a Samson Option could impair rather than reinforce Israel's nuclear war-fighting options.

Concerning prospective contributions to Israel's nuclear war fighting options, preparations for a Samson Option could convince enemy states that any clear victory over Israel would be impossible. With such reasoning, it would be important for Israel to communicate to potential aggressors the following very precise understanding: Israel's counter value-targeted Samson weapons are additional to its counterforce-targeted war fighting weapons. Without such a communication, any preparations for a Samson Option could impair rather than reinforce Israel's nuclear warfighting options.

Undoubtedly, as was concluded earlier by Project Daniel,⁴ nuclear war fighting, wherever possible, should be scrupulously avoided by Israel.

The purpose of Israel's nuclear forces and doctrine must always be deterrence *ex ante*, not revenge *ex post*.

But there still remain some readily identifiable circumstances in which nuclear exchanges could be unavoidable, whatever Israel might have done to prevent them. Here, some forms of nuclear warfighting could ensue, so long as: (a) enemy state first-strikes launched against Israel would not destroy Israel's second-strike nuclear capability; (b) enemy state retaliations for an Israeli conventional preemption would not destroy Israel's nuclear counter-retaliatory capability; (c) conventional Israeli preemptive strikes would not destroy enemy state second-strike nuclear capability; and (d) Israeli retaliations for enemy state conventional first strikes would not destroy enemy state nuclear counter-retaliatory capability.

From the standpoint of protecting its overall existential security, this means that Israel must take appropriate steps to ensure the plausibility of (a) and (b), above, and the implausibility of (c) and (d).

"Do you know what it means to find yourself face to face with a madman?" Repeating this pertinent question from Luigi Pirandello's *Henry IV* does have immediate relevance to Israel's existential dilemma. At the same time, the mounting strategic challenge to Israel will come

primarily from enemy decision-makers who are not-at-all mad, and who are still more-or-less rational.

Promptly, Israel will need to fashion a comprehensive and suitably-calibrated strategic doctrine, one from which various specific policies and operations could readily be extrapolated. This focused framework would identify and correlate all available strategic options (deterrence, preemption, active defense, strategic targeting, nuclear war fighting) with core survival goals. It would also take close account of the possible interactions between these strategic options, and of determinable “synergies” between all conceivable enemy actions directed against Israel. Actually calculating these particular interactions and synergies will present a computational task on the very highest order of intellectual difficulty.

Nuclear deterrence is a “game” that certain sane national leaders must play, but to compete effectively, a would-be winner must always first assess (1) the expected rationality of each critical opponent; and (2) the probable costs and benefits of pretending irrationality oneself. These are undoubtedly complex, interactive, and glaringly imprecise forms of assessment, but, just as doubtlessly, they constitute an indispensable foundation for Israel’s long-term security. Doctrinally, it is already time for them to become part of Jerusalem’s codified and revitalized Order of Battle.⁵

[1] See, recently, by this author: Louis René Beres, “Like Two Scorpions in a Bottle: Could Israel and a Nuclear Iran Coexist in the Middle East,” *The Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 8., No.1., 2014, pp. 23-32; Louis René Beres and (General/USAF/ret.) John T. Chain, “Could Israel Safely Deter a Nuclear Iran?” *The Atlantic*, August 9, 2012; and Professor Beres and General Chain, “Living With Iran,” *BESA Center for Strategic Studies*, Israel, May 2014. General Chain was Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Strategic Air Command (CINCSAC).

[2] In the case of Israel versus Iran, it is conceivable, in certain developing circumstances, that an Israeli preemption could still be rational. These are circumstances wherein the expected probability of an already-nuclear Iran launching nuclear first strikes against Israel would be calculated (by Israel) as very high. Here, however, as a tempering or thoroughly sobering caveat, it must also be kept in mind that any such judgments of probability would be entirely subjective. Mathematically, of course, there could be no meaningful science in ascertaining the odds of such an utterly unique event.

[3] This particular term has been used incessantly by virtually all Arab elements since 1948. On this point, see especially: Yehoshafat Harkabi, *Arab Attitudes to Israel* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House), 1972, especially Chapter 2, "The Arab Ideology of the Conflict."

[4] See: *Israel's Strategic Future: Project Daniel* (The Project Daniel Group, Louis René Beres, Chair), Ariel Center for Policy Research, Israel, ACPR Policy Paper No. 155, May 2004, 64pp.

[5] Recently, by this writer, see: Louis René Beres, "Israel's Strategic Doctrine: Updating Intelligence Community Responsibilities," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, 2015. 28:1, pp. 89-104; Louis René Beres, "Changing Direction: Updating Israel's Nuclear Doctrine," *Strategic Assessment, The Institute for National Security Studies*, Tel-Aviv University, Vol. 17, No.3., October 2014, pp. 93-106; Louis René Beres, "Facing Myriad Enemies: Core Elements of Israeli Nuclear Deterrence," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Fall/Winter 2013, Vol. XX, Issue 1., pp. 17-30; and Louis René Beres, "Looking Ahead: Revising Israel's Nuclear Ambiguity in the Middle East," Herzliya Conference Policy Paper, Herzliya Conference, IDC, Israel, March 11-14, 2013. On the specific deterrence issue of nuclear sea-basing (submarines) by Israel, see: 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. Admiral Edney was NATO Supreme Allied Commander/Atlantic.

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