

Nuclear War or Nuclear Peace? Israel's Post-Iran Pact Options

by **Louis René Beres** (March 2016)

For by wise counsel thou shalt make thy war. (Proverbs 24:6)

The more things change, the more they remain the same. This is especially true in the Middle East. It follows, even after the July 2015 Vienna Agreement on Iran's nuclear program, that Israel's core survival problems remain pretty much what they have always been.

To deal adequately with these problems, Jerusalem will first have to recall that its most basic struggles in the region are matters of "mind over mind," not merely "mind over matter." For Israel, going forward, it will be vital to remember that its overriding security concerns ought always to be broadly intellectual, not narrowly tactical, or operational.

The geostrategic coordinates are clear. A small country, indeed, a microstate less than half the size of Lake Michigan, remains surrounded by several openly-genocidal enemy states – some of which plainly seek assorted weapons of mass destruction. Israel also remains beset by irredentist insurgent forces, both *Sunni* and *Shiite*, that are more-or-less sustained by these conspicuously adversarial states. Further, several of these relentlessly hostile groups are comprised largely of "Holy Warriors" or *shahids*, Islamist fighters still seeking a glorious martyrdom via terror or, perhaps in the future, mega-terror.

With its current strategic planning, Israel must also plan for the perilous prospect of an entire enemy country that could sometime choose to behave as if it were a suicide bomber in macrocosm. By definition, such dire behavior would involve acting without any ordinary or evident regard for rational decision-making. Faced, thereby, with conditions wherein more traditional threats of deterrence could effectively be immobilized, Israel's task must now become more expectantly multi-faceted. To be precise, Jerusalem should prepare capably for

- (1) various still-feasible forms of preemption;
- (2) steadily improved (multi-layered or tiered) active defenses; and
- (3) pertinent nuclear policy revisions, doctrinal adaptations needed, *inter alia*, to suitably maintain the tiny country's long-term nuclear deterrent. In essence, Israeli nuclear weapons that are not suitably informed by antecedent doctrine could sometime fail in their indispensable mission of preventing existential loss.

In forging adequate doctrine, special challenges of strategic prediction must be met by Israel. Looking at the current area situation systematically, including the formidable rise of ISIS, and at the corollary collapse of order in Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and elsewhere, a truly basic question must be raised: *What should Jerusalem now expect to happen, here, in this increasingly chaotic region?*

To respond to the predictive challenge, a competent "strategic dialectic" will need to be fashioned. It will not be enough, in this complex task, to focus only on traditional "correlation of forces" data, or even on more usually exhaustive examinations of a prospective enemy's "order of battle." Rather, Israeli planners must specifically begin to inquire: *How might a nuclear war (any nuclear war) actually begin in the Middle East?*

Significantly, such necessary queries, though critically important, are still encountered only rarely in the (unclassified) strategic literature.

Why? This is hardly a minor matter.

U.S. President Barack Obama's oft-stated preference for "a world free of nuclear weapons" notwithstanding, nuclear weapons are not evil in themselves. Rather, Israel's presumptive nuclear weapons, unacknowledged and unthreatening, serve very quietly to prevent certain distinct forms of aggression. With little ascertainable doubt, this national deterrent force would never be used except in defensive reprisal for certain massive enemy first-strikes, especially for any Arab and/or Iranian attacks involving nuclear and/or biological weapons.

From the beginning, Israel's nuclear weapons have been conceived with a view to *purposeful non-use*. Or, to use the specific words of the *Project Daniel* Final

Report, *Israel's Strategic Future* (May, 2004, Israel): "*The primary point of Israel's nuclear forces must always be deterrence ex ante, not revenge ex post.*" Significantly, this point is consistent with the much earlier and markedly pre-nuclear counsel of ancient Chinese strategist, Sun-Tzu. Says Sun-Tzu in his *The Art of War*: "*Subjugating the enemy's army without fighting is the true pinnacle of excellence.*"

For the time being, at least, Israel's enemies are all still non-nuclear, but this could change in the foreseeable future. It is also true that non-Arab and non-Persian Pakistan is an already-nuclear Islamic state, and that this unstable country remains vulnerable to a Jihadist *coup d'etat*. Should such a coup ever be successful, Israel could quickly find itself living in a much less stable environment than it does today, or even than ever before.

Going forward, Israel's nuclear weapons could continue to reduce the risks of unconventional war, but only as long as those particular enemy states involved were to (1) remain rational; and (2) remain convinced that Israel would always retaliate massively if attacked with nuclear and/or biological weapons of mass destruction.

Of course, the expected risk-reductions offered by Israeli nuclear forces and doctrine would likely be far smaller in the event of any terrorist (sub-national or enemy surrogate) adversaries. Already, there are good reasons to fear that *Shiite* Hezbollah and/or *Sunni* ISIS could acquire or exploit certain weapons of mass-destruction. In this connection, Israel's own Dimona nuclear reactor could possibly be exploited as such a weapon.

Hezbollah has several times threatened to strike Dimona with missiles in its next war with Israel. In 1991 and 2014, Iraq and Hamas respectively actually tried to penetrate Dimona with missiles and rockets, but without success. Earlier, Israel had destroyed Iraq's *Osirac* (1981) and Syria's *Kibar* (2007) reactors, but without creating any nuclear fallout hazards.

A corollary problem could concern the implementation of Palestinian statehood, especially with the new state's attendant vulnerability to ISIS or other related forms of terrorist takeover. In this connection, it is improbable that any new Palestinian "army" could effectively stand up to advancing ISIS forces, a scenario that could come to pass with any future ISIS march westward across

Jordan, and toward the now-porous borders of “Palestinian” West Bank (Judea/Samaria). For their part, the ISIS forces are sustained not only by some of the more usual forms of military ordnance, but also by the uniquely compelling *promise of immortality*. Much as this promise is generally overlooked by Americans and Europeans – because it is so flagrantly out of synch with our own culturally core beliefs and values – it does typically trump all other competing forms of power in the Arab and Islamic world.

Going forward with its nuclear doctrine, therefore, Israeli planners will need to include closer considerations of the promise of power over death.

During the preparation of its Final Report, the *Project Daniel Group* also explored a variant of the “power over death” problem, a nuance wherein an enemy state or combination of states does not actually seek “martyrdom,” but because of these states’ vast demographic advantage, is still willing to accept huge losses (because Israel’s relative losses would expectedly be much greater). If, for example, an enemy state or states were to calculate that it could afford a 1-to-1 exchange ratio with Israel, it/they could effectively compel Israel’s losses to be in the high existential range. The plausible prospect of any such enemy calculation further underscores Israel’s ultra-sensitivity to enemy weapons of mass destruction, and also the country’s corollary imperative to adopt a life-saving policy of preemption, where otherwise appropriate.

All things considered, there will be many complex and intersecting problems for Jerusalem to identify, in advance, should a bellicose enemy state or states somehow be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons. These problems belie the seemingly agreeable theoretic notions of stable nuclear deterrence. Whether for reasons of miscalculation, accident, unauthorized capacity to fire, coup d’état, outright irrationality, or the presumed imperatives of *Jihad*, such a state could sometime opt to launch a nuclear first-strike against Israel – this in spite of that enemy country’s nuclear posture, whether ambiguous or unambiguous. Here, most assuredly, Israel would respond, to whatever extent still possible, with a nuclear retaliatory strike. Among other things, to more reliably ensure essential survivability of its nuclear retaliatory forces, Israel should continue with its presumptive program of nuclear sea-basing on board optimally configured submarines.[1]

Although, of course, nothing is publicly known about Israel’s precise targeting

doctrine, any Israeli nuclear reprisal could be launched toward an aggressor's capital city, or against other similarly high-value urban targets. In essence, there could be no authoritative guarantees, in response to any such blatantly egregious sorts of Arab or Iranian aggression, that Israel would intentionally limit itself to striking back against exclusively military targets, or even against that particular individual enemy state from which the initial aggression had been launched. Doctrinally, here, it could make considerable sense for Israel to clarify that in those confused circumstances wherein it is uncertain precisely where the responsibility for a WMD aggression lies (an example, perhaps, of Clausewitzian "friction"), the Jewish State could then choose to simultaneously launch its promised retaliation against *several* suspected adversary states in the region. According to the *Project Daniel* Final Report: "Regarding effective deterrence in such situations, the Group feels that Israel must identify explicitly, and early on, all enemy Arab states and Iran as subject to massive Israeli reprisal in the event of BN (Biological/Nuclear) attacks upon Israel."

When these words were first written, the *Project Daniel* Group specifically had in mind an "anonymous attack" circumstance (a complex or even chaotic situation, in which the attacking state does not identify itself, and where an Israeli identification of the pertinent aggressor is seriously problematic), but the logic of our argument can now be extended beyond this particular scenario. It could be purposeful for Israel to clarify further that even certain enemies which were not directly involved in the actual attack would remain subject to an Israeli nuclear retaliation, so long as these enemies were substantially complicit in making preparations for the anti-Israel aggression.

Now, what if enemy first-strikes were to involve "only" chemical and/or biological weapons? Here Israel might still launch a reasonably proportionate nuclear reprisal, but this would depend largely upon Israel's previously calculated expectations of follow-on aggression, and also on its associated determinations of comparative damage-limitation. Should Israel absorb a massive conventional first-strike, a nuclear retaliation could not automatically be ruled out. This is especially the case if: (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.

Recognizing Israel's evidently small size, and its tightly-concentrated infrastructures, the threshold of existential harms for the Jewish State is plausibly much lower than wholesale physical annihilation. *To be sure, this key deterrence point should be communicated to all of Israel's pertinent enemies.*

In principle, at least, when faced with imminent and potentially existential attacks, Israel could decide to preempt pertinent enemy aggression using solely conventional forces. Here, more than anything else, the designated targeted state's response would then determine Israel's subsequent moves. If this response were in any way nuclear, Israel would almost surely undertake nuclear counter-retaliation. If this enemy retaliation were to involve chemical and/or biological weapons, Israel could then determine to undertake some yet-to-be decided quantum escalatory initiative.

This sort of posture, known in proper military parlance as "escalation dominance," could prove essential, for Israel, in order to ensure adequate and optimally favorable *intra-war deterrence*.

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 any forms of nuclear counter-retaliation. On the other hand, if the enemy state's conventional retaliation were an all-out strike directed toward Israel's civilian populations, as well as to Israeli military targets – an existential strike, for all intents and purposes – an Israeli nuclear counter-retaliation could not automatically be ruled out. Such a counter-retaliation could be excluded 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 necessity," and accompanied by explicit and verifiable assurances of no further escalation.

It is unlikely, but still not inconceivable, that Israel could at some point decide to preempt enemy state aggression with a nuclear defensive strike. While circumstances could arise wherein such a defensive strike would be completely rational, and also completely acceptable under international law,[2] it is nonetheless improbable that Israel would ever permit itself to reach such fearful circumstances. More specifically, an Israeli nuclear preemption could be expected only if: (1) Israel's state enemies had unexpectedly acquired nuclear or other unconventional weapons, presumed capable of destroying the tiny Jewish

State; (2) these enemy states had made explicit that their intentions paralleled their capabilities; (3) these states were authoritatively believed ready to begin a countdown-to-launch; and (4) Israel believed that non-nuclear preemptions could not possibly achieve the minimum needed levels of damage-limitation – that is, levels consistent with its own national survival.

Should nuclear weapons ever be introduced into a conflict between Israel and some of the countries that wish to destroy it, some form of nuclear warfighting could ensue. This would be the case so long as: (a) enemy state first-strikes against Israel would not destroy the Jewish State's second-strike nuclear capability; (b) enemy state retaliations for Israeli conventional preemption would not destroy Israel's nuclear counter-retaliatory capability; (c) Israeli preemptive strikes involving nuclear weapons would not destroy enemy state second-strike nuclear capabilities; and (d) Israeli retaliation for enemy state conventional first-strikes would not destroy enemy state nuclear counter-retaliatory capability. From the standpoint of protecting its security and survival, this means that Israel must now take proper steps to ensure the likelihood of (a) and (b) above, and the unlikelihood of (c) and (d).

Israeli nuclear and non-nuclear preemptions of enemy unconventional aggressions could both lead to nuclear exchanges. This would depend, in part, upon the effectiveness and breadth of Israeli targeting, the surviving number of enemy nuclear weapons, and on the willingness of controlling enemy leaders to risk Israeli nuclear counter-retaliations. In any event, the likelihood of nuclear exchanges would be greatest where potential Arab and/or Iranian aggressors had been allowed to deploy ever-larger numbers of unconventional weapons without eliciting any appropriate Israeli and/or American preemptions. For the moment, following the July 2015 Vienna Pact, it would appear that such an allowance has already been made, at least in particular reference to Iran.

It is also reasonable to assume that because of the inherent limitations of all legal agreements in this realm, Sunni Egypt and/or Sunni Saudi Arabia may soon seek the bomb for acquiring nuclear "balance" with Shiite Iran. These limitations, moreover, are also more widely generic (not just confined to the Middle East), as already expressed insightfully by the seventeenth-century English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes. Observed Hobbes, in his great classic, *Leviathan*: "*Covenants without the sword are but words.*"

Should enemy nuclear deployments be allowed to take place, Israel could effectively forfeit the non-nuclear preemption option. Here, its only alternatives to a nuclear preemption could then be a no-longer viable conventional preemption, or, instead, to wait quietly *to be attacked itself*. It follows that the risks of an Israeli nuclear preemption, of nuclear exchanges with an enemy state, and of enemy nuclear first-strikes could all conceivably be reduced by still-timely Israeli and/or American non-nuclear preemptions. More than likely, these preemptions would be directed at presumptively critical military-industrial targets, and/or at hostile regimes. The latter very problematic option could include dedicated elimination of enemy leadership elites, and/or of certain enemy scientists.

Always, the objective of Israel's nuclear forces and doctrine must be deterrence *ex ante*, not revenge *ex post*. In the final analysis, as everyone should finally understand, nuclear war resembles any other incurable disease. The only true remedies must lie in prevention.

Looking at the increasingly chaotic Middle East, where several Sunni Arab states and Shiite Iran (however much they might loathe each other) remain commonly sworn to "root out the Zionist cancer," the only durable remedy for Israel is to continually ensure the country's nuclear monopoly. Ideally, merely to survive, Israel should remain the only regional atomic power. But should this core objective, at some point, no longer be viable, Israel's strategic planners should then do whatever is necessary to substantially upgrade the country's nuclear deterrence posture.

This "upgrade" could include additional sea-basing of selected nuclear forces (especially if Palestinian statehood had created new threats to Israel's land-based retaliatory, or second-strike, nuclear forces), and also taking a variety of aptly measured steps away from "deliberate nuclear ambiguity." The principal point of any such steps would be not to reaffirm the obvious (merely, that Israel *has* nuclear weapons), but rather to ensure that these weapons are recognizably *survivable*, *usable*, and "*penetration capable*," that is, able to get through *any* deployed enemy systems of ballistic missile defense.[3]

Si vis pacem, para bellum atomicum. "If you want a nuclear peace, prepare for nuclear war."

[1] On Israeli submarine-basing measures, 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 a NATO Supreme Allied Commander, Atlantic.

[2] See *Summary of the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons*, Advisory Opinion, 1996, International Court of Justice (8 July 1996).

[3] For Israel, most likely using German-supplied Dolphin-class diesel boats, the optimal path to survivable nuclear retaliatory forces at sea will likely involve nuclear cruise missiles deployed on board SSGs. The core issue for nuclear weapons survivability at sea relates to the stealth of the platform, and also the resilience of the national command authority that must ultimately control its pertinent decisions. In principle, at least, Israeli nuclear cruise missiles could achieve levels of penetration reliability very similar to U.S.-deployed nuclear ballistic missiles. Of course, because precise future developments in anti-submarine warfare (ASW) are problematic to predict, enemy missile defenses, going forward, could sometime prove less effective against one particular form of retaliatory missile, than another. Any such development would depend, *inter alia*, upon the specific capabilities each relevant form would possess, concerning primarily stealth, speed, decoys, and maneuverability.

First published in [here](#).

To help New English Review continue to publish interesting and insightful articles such as this, please click [here](#).

If you have enjoyed this article by Louis René Beres and want to read more of his work, please click [here](#).

Louis René Beres contributes regularly to *The Iconoclast*, our Community Blog. Click [here](#) to see all his contributions, on which comments are welcome.

