

Ominous Synergies: Iran's Nuclear Weapons and a Palestinian State

Defensive warfare does not consist of waiting idly for things to happen. We must wait only if it brings us visible and decisive advantages. That calm before the storm, when the aggressor is gathering new forces for a great blow, is most dangerous for the defender." –Carl von Clausewitz, *Principles of War* (1812)

For Israel, long beleaguered on many fronts, Iranian nuclear weapons and Palestinian statehood are progressing at approximately the same pace. Although this simultaneous emergence is proceeding without any coordinated intent, the combined security impact on Israel will still be considerable. Indeed, this synergistic impact could quickly become intolerable, but only if the Jewish State insists upon maintaining its current form of "defensive warfare."

Iran and Palestine are not separate or unrelated hazards to Israel. Rather, they represent intersecting, mutually reinforcing, and potentially existential perils. It follows that Jerusalem must do whatever it can to reduce the expected dangers, synergistically, on both fronts. Operationally, defense must still have its proper place. Among other things, Israel will need to continually enhance its multilayered active defenses. Once facing Iranian nuclear missiles, a core component of the synergistic threat, Israel's "Arrow" ballistic missile defense system would require a fully 100% reliability of interception.

There is an obvious problem. Any such needed level of reliability would be unattainable. Now, Israeli defense planners must look instead toward conceptualizing and managing

long-term deterrence.

Even in the best of all possible strategic environments, establishing stable deterrence will present considerable policy challenges. The intellectual and doctrinal hurdles are substantially numerous and complex; they could quite possibly become rapidly overwhelming. Nonetheless, because of the expected synergistic interactions between Iranian nuclear weapons and Palestinian independence, Israel will soon need to update and further refine its overall strategy of deterrence.

Following the defined meaning of synergy, intersecting risks from two seemingly discrete “battle fronts,” or separate theatres of conflict, would actually be greater than the simple sum of their respective parts.

One reason for better understanding this audacious calculation has to do with expected enemy rationality. More precisely, Israel’s leaders will have to accept that certain more-or-less identifiable leaders of prospectively overlapping enemies might not always be able to satisfy usual standards of rational behavior.

With such complex considerations in mind, Israel must plan a deliberate and systematic move beyond the country’s traditionally defensive posture of deliberate nuclear ambiguity. By preparing to shift toward more prudentially selective and partial kinds of nuclear disclosure, Israel might better ensure that its still-rational enemies would remain subject to Israeli nuclear deterrence. Over time, such careful preparations could even prove indispensable.

Israeli planners will also need to understand that the efficacy or credibility of the country’s nuclear deterrence posture could vary inversely with enemy judgments of Israeli nuclear destructiveness. In these circumstances, however ironic, enemy perceptions of a too-large or too-destructive Israeli nuclear deterrent force, or of an Israeli force that

is plainly vulnerable to first-strike attacks, could undermine this posture.

Israel's adversaries, Iran especially, must consistently recognize the Jewish State's nuclear retaliatory forces as penetration capable. A new state of Palestine would be non-nuclear itself, but could still present an indirect nuclear danger to Israel.

Israel does need to strengthen its assorted active defenses, but Jerusalem must also do everything possible to improve its core deterrence posture. In part, the Israeli task will require a steadily expanding role for advanced cyber-defense and cyber-war.

Above all, Israeli strategic planners should only approach the impending enemy threats from Iran and Palestine as emergently synergistic. Thereafter, it would become apparent that any combined threat from these two sources will be more substantial than the mere arithmetic addition of its two components. Nuanced and inter-penetrating, this prospectively combined threat needs to be assessed more holistically as a complex adversarial unity. Only then could Jerusalem truly understand the full range of existential harms now lying latent in Iran and Palestine.

Armed with such a suitably enhanced understanding, Israel could meaningfully hope to grapple with these unprecedented perils. Operationally, inter alia, this would mean taking much more seriously Carl von Clausewitz's early warnings on "waiting idly for things to happen." Interestingly, long before the Prussian military theorist, ancient Chinese strategist Sun-Tzu had observed in *The Art of War*, "Those who excel at defense bury themselves away below the lowest depths of the earth. Those who excel at offense move from above the greatest heights of Heaven. Thus, they are able to preserve themselves and attain complete victory."

Unwittingly, Clausewitz and Sun-Tzu have left timely messages for Israel. Facing complex and potentially synergistic enemies in Iran and Palestine, Jerusalem will ultimately need to take appropriate military initiatives toward these foes. More or less audacious, depending upon what area strategic developments should dictate, these progressive initiatives may not propel Israel "above the greatest heights of Heaven," but they could still represent Israel's very best remaining path to long-term survival.