

## Israel

### *A Sui Generis Proliferator*

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Israel is commonly viewed as the world's sixth nuclear power, the first and the only state in the Middle East to have acquired nuclear weapons. While exact figures are unknown, it is generally believed that the Israeli nuclear arsenal is significant in numbers and advanced in quality. Estimates of the Israeli nuclear arsenal vary, usually ranging from fewer than 100 up to 200 or more warheads (Cirincione et al. 2005; Hersh 1991; SIPRI 2006). Even by this modest estimate Israel appears to have a lead over both India and Pakistan in the strength of its nuclear arsenal.<sup>1</sup>

These estimates, however, ignore Israel's most distinct feature as a nuclear power: its commitment to caution and constraint as manifested in its unique code of nuclear conduct. To this day, two generations after Israel crossed the nuclear threshold, it has not acknowledged its nuclear status. This extraordinary conduct sets Israel apart from all other established nuclear weapon states. Israel has never issued a membership claim to the nuclear club. And of course, Israel has never issued an explicit nuclear threat. At home, Israeli military censors do not allow the media to refer factually to the nation's nukes; all reference to nuclear weapons has to be attributed to "foreign sources." Nuclear caution—in the form of a strict policy and conduct of nuclear opacity—is probably Israel's most original contribution to the nuclear age. It complements the commitment to nuclear resolve.

The interaction between these two opposing forces—resolve and caution—has shaped the direction and character of Israel's nuclear policy throughout its history. It is the key to understanding the special purpose and role that nuclear weapons play in Israel's national security strategy, the way Israel has built its nuclear forces, and the nonproliferation diplomacy it has devised over the years. In all, this constitutes Israel's portrait as a sui generis case of proliferation.

In this chapter I elaborate, from a historical perspective, on Israel's nuclear policies and posture as that country confronts the new challenges of the early twenty-first century. Specifically, the chapter focuses on the following issues: Israel's fundamental nuclear dilemma, some of its key historical decisions, an appraisal of its current policy, and its looming challenges. I conclude with some reflections on the future.

I must add a note of scholarly caution about the limitations of academic research on this subject. Israel's unique nuclear condition directly affects the state of the research (Cohen 2005c; Dowty 1975, 2005).<sup>2</sup> Given the sketchy and unconfirmed public information that exists on the subject, the core facts in this chapter are inevitably tentative and partial, somewhat interpretive, and at times speculative. A great deal of the historical narrative I present here without additional citation and footnotes is based on my previous (and more detailed) historical accounts (Cohen 1998a, 1998b, 2000, 2003, 2005a, 2005b; Cohen and Burr 2006).

### Israel's Fundamental Nuclear Dilemma

One way to conceptualize Israel's nuclear posture is as an ongoing effort to address one fundamental dilemma: whether, how, and to what extent nuclear weapons could serve or disserve Israel's pursuit of existential security. On this issue, Israel's nuclear pursuit has been driven by two opposing impulses or convictions: resolve and caution.

Israel's nuclear resolve is a commitment to develop and acquire the bomb in order to ensure the nation's existential security. This impulse has shaped the way Israel built its nuclear capabilities. The nuclear caution is manifest as a commitment to keep the Middle East free of nuclear weapons because nuclear weapons in enemy hands could pose a genuine existential threat to Israel. This imperative has inspired Israel's nonproliferation and counterproliferation policies (Cohen 1994). Inevitably, there is an intrinsic tension between resolve and caution.

Israel's response to this fundamental dilemma has been somewhat "schizophrenic"; that is, Israel has been trying to maintain both horns of the dilemma. This pattern started with David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister (1948–53, 1955–63), who initiated the nation's nuclear program in the 1950s, and it continues to this day. Israel's nuclear posture has been ambiguous because the nation has still not sealed its deal with the bomb in a straightforward way.

#### *The Resolve Impulse*

To highlight the continuity of the nuclear resolve, one must start with Ben-Gurion's worldview. Imbued with the Holocaust trauma, Ben-Gurion's geopolitical outlook was consumed by a deep existential anxiety about Israel's long-term survival. It stemmed from a sober view of the fundamentals of the Arab-Israeli

conflict. Here are the basic features of Ben-Gurion's outlook as they came into being in the years after the 1948 war (Bar Zohar 1987; Ben Gurion 1969, 1971; Mardor, 1981; Shalom, 2002).

- *Depth of the conflict.* The Arab-Israeli conflict runs deep—it is a conflict about land—and is not amenable to a quick diplomatic settlement. Hence, more rounds of the Arab-Israeli conflict are likely.
- *Unlikelihood of political settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.* It would be difficult for the Arabs to accept the outcome of the 1948 war as final. Only when they are convinced that the post-1948 reality cannot be reversed by force could a lasting reconciliation of the conflict—peace—become possible. This is not likely to happen soon.
- *The Holocaust lessons.* The lesson of the Holocaust is that small Israel, lacking a formal alliance with an outside world power, must create its own existential national insurance policy for “a rainy day.”
- *Concerns about a pan-Arab grand war coalition.* The conventionally armed Israel Defense Forces (IDF) would encounter great difficulty in deterring a pan-Arab war coalition against Israel.
- *Unconventional deterrence.* Given the geopolitical asymmetries of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel may not be able to win a conventional arms race with the Arabs. Conventional weapons might not be sufficient to ensure an Israeli edge in deterrence or victory in war for the long run.
- *The “brain” factor.* Only reliance on the fruits of science and technology allows Israel to compensate for its geopolitical disadvantages—that is, its fundamental inferiority in manpower, land, and resources.

This outlook is the key to understanding the Ben Gurionite origins of Israel's nuclear resolve. For a small nation born out of the ashes of the Holocaust, surrounded by neighbors committed to its destruction, and without a security alliance with any world power, the rationale for pursuing the bomb was obvious.<sup>3</sup> Only nuclear weapons could provide Israel with the existential insurance it needed. The notion of a national nuclear project was conceived as a way to provide future Israeli leaders an extra margin of existential security, a response against unexpected existential threats.

Ben-Gurion's geopolitical outlook was rooted in the historical reality of his time. However, a great deal of his outlook has survived the march of time. By and large, Israelis still see themselves facing existential threats (Arian 1995). Resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict—the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict—still looks elusive. And as long as the core issue remains unresolved, so will the larger Arab-Israeli conflict. Despite the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, most Israelis still view themselves as a nation under siege (Arian 1995).

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The Holocaust as a national memory and a national commitment adds another key perspective to the existential rationale for Israel's nuclear project. With the Holocaust as its founding memory, the State of Israel was established on the pledge never to allow the Jewish people to suffer another Holocaust.<sup>4</sup> As long as Israel faces existential threats, Israel will feel the need to maintain capabilities of existential deterrence—that is, its nuclear capability.

More than half a century after the Holocaust, its impact on the Israeli mind remains as fresh and pervasive as ever. The Holocaust is the most constitutive experience in Jewish history. For many Jews and non-Jews alike, it is the strongest moral and political justification for the existence of Israel as a Jewish state. Israel's commitment to "Never Again" is stronger now than ever before. The old concern over the formation of a grand Arab conventional war coalition against Israel barely exists anymore; it has been replaced by renewed talk about "wiping Israel off the map."

Six decades after the Holocaust and after the founding of the State of Israel, Israelis are still afflicted with a deep sense of existential anxiety about their place in the world. This existential anxiety may explain why contemporary Israelis view Ben-Gurion's decision to embark on Israel's nuclear project as the most fateful, wise, and praiseworthy set of decisions any Israeli prime minister has ever taken.<sup>5</sup>

### *The Caution Impulse*

Israel's nuclear dilemma, however, has a nearly equal counterimpulse, a force toward nuclear caution. Just as the Holocaust trauma is the key to understanding Israel's nuclear resolve—believing that the capability to inflict the horror of Hiroshima would deter another Auschwitz—this trauma constitutes also the strongest argument *against* the introduction of nuclear weapons. Israel does not want to be responsible for another Auschwitz.

While Israel was seeking to establish a regional nuclear monopoly, it recognized that its own nuclear resolve could reverse itself and lead to a situation of nuclear parity. And that outcome could flip the entire strategic situation. Under nuclear parity, small Israel would be many times more vulnerable than its Arab neighbors to the awesome effects of nuclear weapons. A situation of existential security could very quickly turn into existential insecurity. It is the nuclear specter that causes the image of another Holocaust to loom large to the Jewish people. The conclusion is simple: Israel's interest is to make sure that nuclear weapons are not introduced into the Middle East.

This argument was articulated first in the early 1960s, soon after the nuclear project became known, by a small group of antinuclear intellectuals (Cohen 1998a: 142–46). They opposed nuclearization and argued that if Israel were to initiate a nuclear weapon project it would inevitably lead to a counterdevelopment on the

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other side, which would make Israeli's security dramatically worse. A situation of mutual nuclear deterrence would clearly be to Israel's disadvantage. A small Israel would be much more vulnerable to nuclear weaponry than its Arab (or Persian) foes. From this perspective, Israel's nuclear ambition is self-defeating. The nation's true interest lies in nuclear disarmament—that is, a Middle East free of nuclear weapons.

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This campaign never gained the momentum necessary to halt Israel's commitment to nuclear resolve. In the late 1960s, Israel "quietly" crossed the nuclear threshold and the small antinuclear movement disappeared from the public scene. The profound impact of the 1967 Six-Day War dramatically changed the political agenda in Israel; virtually no one had an interest in campaigning against nukes. But the argument in favor of caution did not fade away; it only changed form. As it turned out, the caution impulse continued to have an influence not only on Israel's diplomatic front but also on Israel's nuclear posture. The caution impulse has profoundly shaped the subtle and opaque way in which Israel deals with its nuclear monopoly.

Today, Iran is the state that challenges Israel's nuclear monopoly. Once again, Israelis have become aware how vulnerable their nation is to nuclear weapons. The old argument against nuclear deterrence from the early 1960s has returned with a vengeance: given the geopolitical asymmetries between Iran and Israel, small Israel is unquestionably much more vulnerable to nuclear attack than Iran. Israeli strategists have pointed out the difficulty to produce a stable mutual assured destruction (MAD) regime in the Middle East, given the basic geopolitical asymmetry between the parties (Evron, 1994; Steinberg, 2000).

#### *The Israeli Synthesis: Nuclear Opacity*

In responding to its fundamental nuclear dilemma, Israel chose a posture based on a certain compromise that includes elements of both resolve and caution.

Ben-Gurion's modus operandi in initiating the project planted the seeds of the Israeli synthesis. He took decisive action on the side of technological resolve (he generally preferred action over inaction) but wrapped it with layers of caution and restraint. The scope of the Dimona project indicates how dedicated and ambitious the founding vision was (Pean 1991; Peres 1995). It included all the technological components required for a plutonium-based nuclear weapon infrastructure. The objective was to place Israel within reach of a complete nuclear option within a decade or so. The determination of the vision was manifest in the most important component of the Dimona project—the deep underground reprocessing plant dedicated to extract weapons grade plutonium (Hersh 1991; Pean 1991; Richelson 2005; *Sunday Times* 1986). Nothing could be more indicative of Israel's resolve than this supersecret facility.

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Ben-Gurion's initiation decisions were the closest to a grand decision in favor of the bomb, and yet he was reluctant to present them in that light. He apparently presented the Dimona project to his close political associates as a prudent way to hedge against an uncertain future, as a way of building "options" and "infrastructure" for "future leaders," but not as an actual commitment to build the bomb, and certainly not as a commitment to move toward nuclear deterrence. As Shimon Peres (the nuclear project's chief executive officer) noted decades later, Ben-Gurion made decisions only about what was immediately necessary and kept all other issues deliberately vague and formally undecided. Technological resolve was moderated by political caution (Cohen 1998a; Peres 1995).

The conduct of his successor, Levi Eshkol (1963–69), reinforced this pattern even further. Eshkol did not touch the spirit of resolve that had already been infused into the project—that is, the ethos that the mission was to complete the research and development (R&D) phase *in full*. Like Ben-Gurion, Eshkol provided the funds required to complete the infrastructure but left the long-term (post-R&D) objectives vague and undecided. On the side of caution, he pledged that Israel would not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons to the region, and this pledge had one important implication. While Eshkol generally avoided providing political guidance to the project's leaders, there was one important exception: a full-yield test, which is the final act in the development process, was prohibited. On this key issue, political caution won out over technological resolve. This was necessary to maintain the credibility of his commitment to "nonintroduction" (Cohen 1998a: 231–34, 238).

By 1969 the United States realized that its efforts to halt Israel's nuclear development had failed. Israel's nuclear resolve had won, but it was recognized that this could not be publicly acknowledged: the Israeli bomb must remain invisible. This realization, on both sides, opened the door to a new set of nuclear understandings between the United States and Israel. Israel was committed not to test, not to advertise its capability, and not to threaten anybody. In plain language, the Israeli bomb had to remain invisible (Cohen and Burr 2006).

These nuclear understandings that were struck between the United States and Israel by Prime Minister Golda Meir and President Richard Nixon in September 1969 introduced nuclear opacity as a political *modus vivendi* under which the Israeli bomb would be tolerated by the United States as long as Israel did not acknowledge it in public. In retrospect, the 1969 deal laid the foundations for a unique, almost entirely tacit, code of conduct between the United States and Israel on the nuclear issue. The fundamentals of this code of conduct have survived to this day. Initially, the Israeli bomb was only tolerated but, over the decades, it became acceptable, maybe even quietly endorsed.

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It was only in the mid-to-late 1970s, after the advent of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), that Israeli found itself with a need to devise its own nonprolifera-

tion policy. Support for the cause of nonproliferation reflects Israel's fundamental commitment to nuclear caution. By that time Israel had already decided that NPT obligations were inconsistent with Israel's nuclear program (nuclear resolve), so Israel had to find another modality to demonstrate its commitment to nonproliferation. After internal deliberations, Israel decided to anchor its commitment to nonproliferation through a regional approach (as opposed to the universal approach of the NPT). Israel decided to commit itself to the vision of a nuclear weapon-free zone (NWFZ) but to link it to the demand for full and mutual political recognition of all the states in the Middle East.

This was a way to demonstrate that Israel was positively committed to the principles of nonproliferation, despite its specific opposition to the NPT. While the NPT is inconsistent with Israel's nuclear weapon program, Israel presented its official opposition to the NPT on the grounds of its inadequacy to the security situation of the conflict in the region, in particular the lack of mutual recognition among the states in the region. In other words, only under conditions of peaceful coexistence—that is, after a formal peace had been achieved—could Israel conceive changing its NPT position.

Not only was the NWFZ approach proposed as an alternative to the NPT, but it allowed Israel to explain why it had to reject the NPT, at least for the time being, without openly acknowledging that it had a nuclear weapon program. A nation in conflict when its legitimacy is challenged by its neighbors and is exposed to existential threats cannot rely on the NPT system for its existential security. Notably, Israel defended its decision to stay outside the NPT system not in terms of its own national security requirements (the need to preserve elements of existential deterrence) but rather in terms of the deficiencies of the NPT safeguard system, which a hostile state could abuse to develop nuclear weapons.<sup>6</sup>

The cover of nuclear opacity allows quiet technological resolve to cohabit with a public commitment to nuclear caution. It allows Israel to design its own nonproliferation policy. Opacity permits Israel to keep invisible the tension between resolve and caution.

It is true that Israel's commitment to the NWFZ vision requires nothing immediate. Israel remained a free agent in its nuclear activities, as long as those activities are not visible or public. Still, it means that unlike all other nuclear weapon states, including present-day India and Pakistan, Israel has not made a *public* commitment to possess nuclear weapons. Israel has not legitimized nuclear weapons. This is not meaningless. While some would say that this is merely a matter of rhetoric, this author believes that Israel's commitment to the vision of NWFZ reflects a commitment to nuclear caution. It is an affirmation of the principle that Israel has not sealed its bargain with the bomb as final, complete, or official. Israel has stubbornly avoided giving its bomb a seal of legitimacy, either at home (where the issue is taboo) or abroad (where it maintains its exceptionality stance).

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Israel's nuclear resolve won the day, but that resolve remains wrapped in layer upon layer of political caution, operational restraint, and societal taboo and secrecy. It is true that some of the Israeli nuclear inhibitions and hesitancy are politically motivated; they are rooted in the 1969 Nixon–Meir understanding and reflect an age-old Israeli realistic view that the “world”—not only the Arab world but even the United States—would not agree to grant Israel a nuclear status similar to, say, that of France. However, Israel's nuclear taboo—its societal and normative avoidance of the topic—cannot be reduced to tactics and convenience (Cohen 2005a).<sup>7</sup> The fact that even today—after four decades of nuclear possession and at a time when the old secret is no longer a secret—Israel is still so loyal to this taboo demonstrates its societal-cultural depth.

Resolve and caution are the two pillars of Israel's nuclear predicament. They are based on two sets of historical memories and lessons. Resolve rests on the lessons of Jewish history, in particular the Holocaust. Caution stems from historical insights about the nuclear age itself, particularly as applied to Israel's unique geopolitical position. Ultimately, both resolve and caution stem from the same site in the Israeli psyche, the vow “Never Again.” If the resolve impulse manifests the recognition that the bomb is the only power that could provide Israel a measure of existential security, the caution impulse reflects the realization that nuclearization of the region could place Israel in a much worse existential situation.

### Calibrating Resolve And Caution: Four Israeli Nuclear Dilemmas

Calibrating the balance between resolve and caution has been a continuous challenge for Israel's nuclear policy throughout its history. Addressing this challenge has determined the political, diplomatic, and operational parameters of Israel's nuclear posture. In the following sections, I elaborate, in a quasi-historical fashion, on four key related parameters of the Israeli nuclear posture.<sup>8</sup> Together, I believe, they present a portrait of Israel as a *sui generis* proliferator.

#### *Nuclear Versus Conventional; Political Versus Military*

After a nation embarks on a nuclear weapon program, it needs to define a role for nuclear weapons—and the nuclear program as a whole—within its overall national security posture, in particular to determine an adequate ratio between its conventional and nuclear commitments. While Israel was decisive on the issue of the nuclear infrastructure, it was hesitant, slow, and tentative on the question of designing a balance between its conventional and nuclear commitments. Its leadership wanted a nuclear infrastructure, a bomb “option,” but was less clear initially about its concrete parameters.



Israel started to think about these matters in the early 1960s. Two schools of thought emerged. One school advocated the notion that the IDF should be re-organized to focus on deterrence and achieving “decisive victory” by relying on the anticipated scientific and technological achievements of the 1970s. This school argued that only advanced technological weaponry could provide Israel with the kind of deterrence it needed for the long run without getting caught in an increasingly hopeless conventional arms race that would drain the Israeli economy and tempt the Arabs to prolong the conflict. In the absence of an external security guarantee, the bomb should be Israel’s only independent security guarantee. The advocates of this view called it “the doctrine of self-reliance,” an Israeli version of the French notion of *force de frappe* (Cohen 1998a: 149; Evron 1994).

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The other school invoked an attitude of skepticism, even opposition, toward nuclear weapons. This school carried the message of nuclear caution. Its leaders advocated strengthening the IDF as a strong and modern *conventional* army. They rejected the three fundamental presumptions of the nuclear advocates, questioning the inevitability of the spread of nuclear weapons, dismissing the pessimism underlying the view that the bomb was the only solution for Israel’s long-term security, and more important, raising serious doubts about the applicability of nuclear deterrence to the context of the Middle East. Significantly, the conventionalist school maintained that an Israeli nuclear monopoly would be short term and inevitably replaced by a nuclearized Middle East. They believed that the Soviets would not allow Israel to maintain a nuclear monopoly in the region. Given the geopolitical and demographic asymmetries of the Arab–Israeli conflict, Israel’s national interest was at odds with the nuclearization of the conflict. Investment in a dedicated nuclear weapon program would only weaken the IDF and might encourage the Arabs to wage a preventive war.

According to Israeli lore, Ben-Gurion was reluctant to make a doctrinal decision on the debate. He thought that the debate was premature, theoretical, unnecessary, and counterproductive. Instead, he made smaller incremental decisions, endorsing elements of each school’s agenda: resolve and caution. On the side of resolve, Ben-Gurion authorized a ballistic missile project (to be pursued in collaboration with the French contractor Marcel Dassault). This decision, which was made when the future of the nuclear project was still uncertain and years before Israel made a formal commitment on nuclear weapons, strengthened the commitment to nuclear resolve. The costly missile project made little sense in a non-nuclear context. On the side of caution, Ben-Gurion rejected the proposal (made by Shimon Peres) that Israel should take concrete action to join the nuclear club. It is also believed that Ben-Gurion turned down the proposal to put more funds into the nuclear project at the expense of the conventional army. On the contrary, he authorized establishing another regular armored brigade in the IDF. Most

significant, he decided to maintain the IDF as a conventional army with a doctrine based on conventional warfare (Cohen 1998a: 150–51; Evron 1994).

In retrospect, these decisions left a lasting legacy. Ben-Gurion's reluctance to make a cardinal decision, and his focus instead on smaller, more specific decisions, without changing the conventional orientation of the IDF, set the stage for the approach that would constitute the Israeli idea of a proper ratio between the conventional and the nuclear. Those decisions were derived from the proposition that while Israel must develop and maintain an operational nuclear force for "a rainy day," its overall military posture must remain conventional, not nuclear, *as long as the military threats that Israel faces remained conventional*. The nuclear program was to be treated as an "extra" for unique situations of existential threat. It also affirmed the notion that Israel's self-interest was not to nuclearize the region. This cautious view still shapes the fundamentals of Israeli nuclear thinking (Ne'eman 1986).

A related feature of this legacy is the notion that the nuclear project must be run and controlled strictly by civilian-scientific hands, not as a military project under military responsibility and custodianship. It was apparently an arrangement favored by all. Just as the army generals had a skeptical view of the supersecret project and no real interest in running it, so the nuclear project's leaders did not see themselves as working on a military project and had little interest in reporting to the military. Neither side considered the project's ultimate products—if those products were ever produced—as just another military weapons system. Strict budgetary separation was maintained between the nuclear project and the rest of the defense establishment (Cohen 1998a).

Over time, a great deal of quiet consensus has been built into and reinforced by the decision-making process. It created a strong element of continuity. This consensus is based on the proposition that the role of the nuclear dimension in Israel's national security posture should be narrow and distinct. The main strategic purpose of the nuclear program is to provide the nation with credible deterrence against *existential* threats: that is, those that would endanger the very existence of the state. In fact, it is believed that the Israeli bomb has credibility only on the existential level in the eyes of Israel's potential enemies. Both sides know that Israel would never resort to nuclear weapons in situations short of existential last resort. Having the bomb is about knowing that Israel possesses the ultimate weapon for use in the most unlikely moments of "last resort." It is not about fighting a war.

Viewed in this way, the proper context in which to understand the role of the Israeli nuclear program is political (and psychological), *not* military. That is, the Israeli bomb is about providing the nation's political leaders a sense of existential security in an uncertain world; it is about the ability to project an existential statement to the world; it is about Israel's oath, "Never Again." Conversely, it is *not* about providing another advanced weapon system to the IDF; it is not about Israel's military doctrine.

This does not mean, of course, that the Israeli nuclear program lacks any military meaning. Without operational credibility—and credibility means the ability and the will to use it—the bomb would lack most of its political credibility. But it does mean that the nuclear program should be relatively small, insulated from the mainstream military, and not too costly, and that its liaison with the military must be limited and strict. By and large, it is a political matter, not a military one.

#### *Post-R&D and Post-NPT Dilemmas*

Another (but related) cycle of nuclear decisions with far-reaching consequences that a nation that embarks on a nuclear path must address concerns the post-R&D phase of the nuclear program. In the late 1960s, Israel had to make some new decisions about the depth and substance of its nuclear commitment beyond the R&D stage.

In the experience of previous nuclear weapon states, a full-yield nuclear test signified crossing the weapons threshold and transitioning from the R&D phase to the production and deployment phase. It also was a political act of public acknowledgment. None of the five de jure members of the nuclear club considered skipping the test; nor did they consider forgoing the production and deployment mode. Technologically, Israel could have joined the nuclear club in the late 1960s and become the sixth nuclear state, but, politically and strategically, it was not in a position to take that path. Unlike France and China, the last two additions to the nuclear club, Israel was highly unsure and tentative about its long-term nuclear intentions.

Israel's nuclear program faced a dilemma. On the side of resolve, it was inconceivable to bring to a halt the nuclear project at that critical juncture. The entire rationale of the project was always to set up an *operational* capability available for the existential moment of last resort. Freezing the program in a nondeployable mode was unthinkable to the project's leaders. It was obvious to them that Israel must retain a real nuclear option, not something virtual and amorphous. But on the side of caution, Israel was still pledging "nonintroduction," that it would not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons to the region.

It turned out that those post-R&D dilemmas coincided with the political dilemma that the NPT presented to Israel. While from today's perspective Israel's decision to not sign the NPT looks sensible, almost obvious, it was not so obvious in 1968–69. At that time Israel was unsure, even deeply divided, about the fundamental parameters of its nuclear future. Israel was committed to having some form of a nuclear option, but it lacked clarity as to what that option should look like, and whether—and how—it could be compatible with the NPT. It was feared that the United States would force Israel to sign the NPT (Cohen 2007; Cohen and Burr 2006).

Both issues were ultimately resolved through the Nixon-Meir deal in 1969. In the wake of the deal, in February 1970, Israel formally informed the United States

of its decision not to join the NPT (Cohen and Burr 2006). On the matter of the NPT, resolve trumped caution. The United States tolerated the Israeli decision, accepting Israel as a nonsignatory state to the NPT, and allowed the nuclear issue to vanish almost entirely from the bilateral agenda.

Looking back, one sees that the opacity deal determined a great deal of the operational parameters of Israel's nuclear conduct. Israel went forward with its deployment mode, but did so in a most cautious manner that conformed with the basic requirements of the 1969 deal. The deal also put to rest another nuclear dilemma that Israel would otherwise have had to confront: whether to disclose publicly the nation's nuclear status. The deal reinforced the view that Israel must keep all its nuclear-related activities classified, sealed under total secrecy. This generated far-reaching ramifications for domestic nuclear discourse that have lasted to this day.<sup>9</sup>

If Israel's decision not to join the NPT highlights its commitment to nuclear resolve, its subsequent advocacy of the regional NWFZ vision was an indication of its commitment to nuclear caution. Less than two years after the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty was signed in 1978, Israel joined at the United Nations the Egyptian-Iranian proposal for NWFZ in the region, but insisted that negotiations for such an arrangement must begin only after Israel is recognized by all the region's states and after a regional peace is established (Feldman, 1997; Landau, 2006).

### *The Use Issue*

A nation that develops and acquires nuclear weapons must inevitably address the use issue: the circumstances in which nuclear weapons could be used. In the mid-to-late 1960s Israeli defense intellectuals started to translate the intuitive idea of "last resort" into a concrete nuclear use doctrine. These efforts produced the first articulation of strategic "red lines" that, if crossed, could trigger the use of nuclear weapons. Specifically, four distinct strategic scenarios were identified at that time that could invoke such use: (1) a successful Arab military penetration into populated areas within Israel's post-1949 borders; (2) the destruction of the Israeli air force; (3) the exposure of Israeli cities to massive and devastating air attacks or to possible chemical or biological attacks; and (4) the use of nuclear weapons against Israeli territory. Each of these scenarios was defined as an existential threat to the State of Israel against which the nation could defend itself by no other means than nuclear weapons, which it would be politically and morally justified in using. It was also evident that all of these scenarios were extremely improbable (Cohen 1998a: 237).

Already in the mid-to-late 1960s it was evident that finding a sensible use for nuclear weapons in the Arab-Israeli theater would be highly problematic. At that time some thought that halting a massive troop invasion would be a justified "last resort" use of nuclear weapons. But it became apparent that to use a nuclear bomb *after* a massive Arab army had penetrated Israel's borders would be too late to be

militarily effective and perhaps utterly useless because of the proximity of Israeli troops (or citizens). Conversely, using nuclear weapons to preempt Arab army troops on their way to the border was deemed too early a use—that is, politically unacceptable. Israeli strategists encountered a problem similar to the one that that North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member state planners had been grappling with throughout much of the Cold War: the difficulty of defining the proper moment—militarily and politically—that nuclear weapons can be used effectively to stop a conventionally superior enemy attack (Cohen 1998a: 237; Ne’eman 1986).

Another realization that emerged through those discussions was the deficiency of nuclear ambiguity for deterrence purposes. How could Israel effectively deter if it could never acknowledge possessing the nuclear bomb? It also became evident that it would be politically impossible for Israel to resort to nuclear weapons without an explicit warning, and this could render the very idea of the bomb as a “last resort” impractical. So the Israeli doctrine considers a “demonstration” use an act that must precede real use (Cohen 1998a).

More than four decades have passed since Israel began struggling with the dilemmas of nuclear use. In that period, Israel had three occasions to think about those issues in the context of actual wars—the Six-Day War (1967), the Yom Kippur War (1973), and the First Gulf War (1991). It appears that each war made it clearer how *almost* impossible it is that Israel could find itself in circumstances that would compel it to resort to nuclear weapons. All of these events revealed that, short of a direct nuclear attack, it is *almost* inconceivable that Israel would use nuclear weapons to defend itself against existential threats (Cohen 2000). Yet even if nuclear weapons are nearly unusable as military weapons, Israeli leaders found that nuclear dispositions could play an important role in persuading and deterring action by both friend and foe.

#### *Advanced Weaponry and Arsenal Size*

Another dilemma that all nuclear weapon states must grapple with involves posture and arsenal design: how big and how advanced the nuclear component should be. We know that all the first five nuclear weapon states moved on to develop advanced nuclear weaponry, in particular thermonuclear weapons, within a decade or so. All, except China, also developed tactical nuclear weapons.

Israel’s nuclear secrecy makes it difficult to assess, let alone to determine, how Israel has dealt with its posture design dilemmas. My explications here are educated guesses. There are indirect indications, including the Vanunu revelations (Barnaby 1989; Hersh 1991; Inbar 1999; *Sunday Times* 1986) that after the 1973 war Israel decided to commit itself to more advanced nuclear weaponry. This should not be viewed as a great surprise. Indeed, it is consistent with Israel’s decision in the mid-to-late 1970s to develop a longer range and more accurate intermediate

missile to replace its French-based Jericho I. According to news reports, Israel tested the 1,500-mile Jericho II in the late 1980s and moved into deployment mode around the early 1990s (Cirincione et al. 2005; SIPRI 2006). This manifests Israel's commitment to nuclear resolve.

Despite some claims (e.g., Hersh 1991) that Israel produced, and even possibly deployed, tactical nuclear weapons, I believe that while Israel may have completed the R&D required for such weaponry it ultimately decided against the production and deployment of tactical nuclear weapons. If true, that decision demonstrates Israel's view that nuclear weapons have a distinct and very limited existential deterrence role in its national security posture.

Finally, there is a relatively high degree of uncertainty about the size of the Israeli arsenal. Following the Vanunu revelations, it became common to claim that Israel might have 100 to 200 nuclear weapons. In his *Samson Option*, Seymour Hersh refers to some 300 or even more Israeli weapons, both tactical and strategic (Hersh 1991). More recent estimates, based on leaks attributed to the U.S. intelligence community, refer to a much smaller and stable arsenal, perhaps in the neighborhood of 100 weapons, possibly even fewer than that (Cirincione et al. 2005).

If these claims are true, on matters of advanced weaponry and arsenal size Israel ended up crafting its own careful balance between resolve and caution. On the side of resolve, Israel did not freeze its nuclear development. On the contrary, Israel has moved since the 1970s to advance its weaponry. Given that Israel has some serious limitations on its nuclear R&D, in particular its inability to test, one must assume that Israeli technological resolve found smart ways to compensate for those limitations that would guarantee the safety and reliability of Israeli weapons.

At the same time, these actions highlight Israel's commitment to caution. If it is true that Israel decided not to produce and deploy tactical nuclear weapons, and also kept the size of its arsenal relatively small, this indicates that, unlike most other nuclear nations, Israel treats its nuclear arsenal in merely existential terms. If correct, these decisions are in line with earlier Israeli nuclear decisions, the fundamental decision to maintain the conventional orientation of the Israeli army as well as the related requirements intrinsic to the regime of opacity.

Since the early 1980s (and possibly earlier), the Israeli navy (with the support of other governmental agencies) has promoted the idea that Israel should build a small fleet of modern conventional (diesel) submarines for "strategic purposes," an Israeli euphemism for a sea-launched nuclear capability. After complex negotiations, when a deal was almost signed with a German shipyard in early 1990, it was vetoed by the chief of staff, General Barak, owing to cost considerations (Cirincione et al. 2005; Cohen 2005a).

But after the First Gulf War in 1991, in the wake of Iraq's Scud missile attack against Israel, Israel's strategic picture changed fundamentally. Sometime after the

war, Israel decided to reverse its earlier decision and to establish a sea-based strategic arm. Israel accepted the offer of the German government to finance the purchase of two large diesel submarines and to share equally the cost of the third (because of the role the German industry played in the development of Iraq's unconventional weaponry). The strategic developments throughout the 1990s, in both Iraq and Iran, compounded by the failure of all Western intelligence to detect the full scope of Iraq's nuclear program, were critical in the Israeli decision to boost Israel's strategic capabilities. Nuclear resolve took the lead. It is presumed that the sea-based strategic arm has a second-strike nuclear component (Circione et al. 2005).

By July 2000, Israel completed taking delivery of all three Dolphin-class submarines it had ordered after the First Gulf War at the Thyssen-Nordseewerke shipyard in Kiel, Germany. In doing so, it is assumed Israel has moved significantly toward acquiring a survivable second-strike nuclear capability. By all indications, Israel is now on the way to finalizing the restructuring of its nuclear forces into a triad form. It is also presumed that in recent years Israel has significantly modernized its strategic command and control systems. These are probably the most important strategic developments in Israel.

Initially a fleet of three submarines was believed the minimum Israeli needed to have a deployment at sea of one nuclear-armed submarine at all times. In 2006 Israel placed an order in Germany for two more submarines. A survivable deterrent fleet of five is now perceived essential because of Israel's unique geopolitical and demographic vulnerability to nuclear attack, and one that no potential nuclear enemy of Israel could ignore.

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### Israel's Nuclear Opacity: A Political Appraisal

In retrospect, the 1969 Nixon-Meir opacity deal was a fateful event in Israel's nuclear history, maybe second only to Ben-Gurion's initiation decision. After a stormy decade in which Israel's nuclear program had been a continuous source of irritation and friction in the relations between Israel and the United States, the deal allowed the United States to tolerate Israel's de facto nuclear status. More significantly, the deal removed a thorny issue in their bilateral relations. After the deal Israel was effectively left alone on the nuclear issue, as long as it kept its part of the deal.

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Over time, the Nixon-Meir deal evolved into a working arrangement under which the United States provided Israel diplomatic cover whenever Israel's nuclear program was under attack in international forums, in particular at the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). To put it bluntly, without active and ongoing U.S. support the 1969 deal would not have been as successful as it has been. Endorsement by the United States helped to influence other Western nations' attitudes toward the Israeli bomb.

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But the benefits to Israel from its policy of nuclear opacity go beyond Israeli-U.S. relations or even relations between Israel and the NPT regime. To make an objective appraisal of the benefit to Israel of its posture of nuclear opacity, one has to examine the effects and consequences of the policy through a number of parameters.

#### *Existential Deterrence*

Under opacity Israel has been in possession of nuclear weapons for some two generations, but in a uniquely unacknowledged manner. Israel's possession of nuclear a deterrent is known by both friends and foes alike, yet Israel has never issued an explicit nuclear threat to any country, including Iran. In this way Israel has been able to extract the benefits of maintaining an *existential* nuclear deterrence posture, but without the need even to acknowledge nuclear possession, let alone to issue an explicit nuclear threat. A case in point was the effective way Israel used its nuclear deterrence posture in the First Gulf War (Feldman 1991).<sup>10</sup>

#### *Freedom of Action*

Ultimately, under the veneer of opacity, Israel's nuclear program—the nation's commitment to nuclear resolve—has enjoyed remarkable freedom of action. Total secrecy has served as an extraordinary shield; it insulated the program from the outside world. Nobody—either at home or abroad—could intervene because nobody knew clearly what was going on inside. And even when the veneer seemed to be shattered briefly, as it was with the infamous Vanunu revelations in 1986 (*Sunday Times* 1986), it became evident that the international system had no interest in delving too deeply into the secrets of the Israeli nuclear program. The United States' endorsement influenced other Western nations to treat Israel as a *sui generis* case. Given estimates about the Israeli arsenal and its advanced nature, it could be argued that under opacity Israel's commitment to nuclear resolve has been even better served than under a declared posture. For all practical purposes, the opaque Israeli nuclear program has probably had more freedom of action than a more visible program would have.<sup>11</sup>

The Vanunu revelations may also illustrate this point (*Sunday Times* 1986). On its face, they highlight how mature and advanced the Israeli nuclear program is; they show the remarkable freedom of action that Israel enjoys in this area. However, the limited political reaction they invoked also indicates the lack of political interest on the part of the international community in meddling in Israel's nuclear affairs. Except Norway (where the opposition forced the government to take action on the issue of heavy water that Norway had supplied to Israel in the late 1950s), no Western government made a political issue out of those revelations. Even the official Arab response was relatively mute and restrained.



### *Regional Stability and Peace*

Against the concerns that the advent of Israeli nuclear weapons would further polarize and destabilize the Arab-Israeli conflict, the political reality of Israel's nuclear deterrence under opacity was probably more benign than anyone expected. While it is difficult to measure in precise empirical terms the political effects of nuclear opacity, most Israeli analysts believe that Israeli nuclear deterrence under opacity has contributed to regional stability (Cohen 1992; Evron 1994, 1998; Schiff 2000a, 2000b; Steinberg 2000). It contributed to lowering the intensity of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and in some important cases it even contributed to achieving peace.

A brief historical review highlights this line of thinking. When Ben-Gurion initiated the nuclear project in the late 1950s he did so against the background of pan-Arab discourse about the "destruction of Israel and Zionism." The Arab defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War started the curve of decline of that pan-Arab rhetoric. The 1973 Yom Kippur War, which took place under the shadow of the Israeli bomb, stimulated two related developments. First, Arab discourse about the "destruction of Israel" declined further. Second, it gave impetus to the view that the nuclear age can no longer tolerate total wars. Less than five years later, Egypt's President Anwar Sadat visited Jerusalem and vowed "no more war." It turned out that the 1973 Yom Kippur War was the last great Arab-Israeli war involving major armies in battle. The Egyptian-Israeli 1978 peace treaty was signed under the shadow of the opaque Israeli bomb.<sup>12</sup> Various comments made by President Sadat during his 1977 visit to Jerusalem implied that the bomb played some role in both the fading away of Arab discourse about the destruction of Israel and Egypt's (and subsequently other Arab states') acceptance of Israel as an ineradicable entity in the Middle East. Many Israelis view Israel's invisible bomb as a "quiet" anchor of the Egyptian-Israeli peace.

By and large, the presence of a benign Israeli bomb not only has been grudgingly accepted by the Arab world, including Egypt; it has also quietly contributed to the notion that Israel is a fact in the Middle East that Arabs must accept and learn to reckon with. The Saudi peace plan that calls for a two-state solution in resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict based on the 1948 borders and in return full recognition of Israel by the Arab world highlights the enormous change that has taken place in the Arab world toward Israel. Many Israelis believe that the presence of the "invisible" Israeli bomb has contributed significantly to this development.

### *Impact on Hostile Proliferation*

The most serious concern in the 1960s was that the Israeli nuclear project would stir up a dangerous regional nuclear arms race. This was the fear underlying the

impulse for nuclear caution. However, the regional consequences of the Israeli nuclear bomb under opacity proved to be more benign than had been feared. It turned out that under opacity Israel was able to maintain a benign monopoly.

The record here is mixed, ambiguous, and ultimately incomplete. On four occasions Israel faced the emergence of hostile nuclear programs—Egypt in the 1960s, Iraq in the 1970s and 1980s, Libya in the 1990s, and today the most difficult case, Iran. In the first three instances, owing to a combination of both luck and policy, the hostile proliferator ultimately failed to reach its objectives. Israel's own opacity policy has probably been a moderating force, but surely it was not formidable enough to prevent cases of hostile proliferation.

### *Nuclear Secrecy and Democracy*

I've written extensively elsewhere about the negative nondemocratic domestic aspects of Israel's nuclear opacity (Cohen 2005a, 2005c; also Maoz 2003, 2006), so my comments here are brief and descriptive. While Israelis recognize that the policy of opacity is at odds with the normative principles of liberal democracy—built on secrecy, it stands in tension with the democratic values of open debate, the public's right to know, accountability, and governmental transparency—they support the continuation of the policy. The Israeli citizenry accepts that the far-reaching national security value of the policy, in particular its existential benefits, outweigh its democratic deficiencies. When survival is at stake, in the view of the citizenry, the requirements of national security are more important than democratic principles. The result is that the nuclear issue is treated as a national taboo, and the citizenry endorses this societal attitude (Cohen 2005a).

If this is the case with the citizenry, the national security establishment overwhelmingly supports the continuation of the policy (Schiff 2000a, 2000b, 2001). In addition to the many international benefits, the policy provides extraordinary bureaucratic benefits. Most important, it provides the bureaucracy with the convenience of acting out of sight of the public eye, in a culture of secrecy with little transparency. It allows the bureaucracy to be kept both insulated and isolated (Maoz 2003).

In sum, Israel's policy of nuclear opacity is viewed by Israeli policy makers and the public alike as a remarkable national success story. Probably no other government policy in Israel has enjoyed such strong popular consensus and support as the policy of nuclear opacity. It is viewed by Israelis as a "smart" way to live with nuclear weapons, to extract existential deterrence, but without paying the "dues" that other nuclear weapon states have to pay. It would be fair to say that Israelis—the public and its elected officials—have fallen in love with the posture (Schiff 2000a, 2001).

## The New Challenges: Iran and Beyond

Israel's nuclear policy, especially its loyalty to opacity, has been dominated by a strong element of continuity. All other nuclear nations—with the possible exception of South Africa—advertise their nuclear weapon status. It took India and Pakistan years to resolve their deal with the bomb, but both nations decided in 1998 to introduce nuclear weapons. But Israel took a different and *sui generis* path. Since the 1960s, all Israeli prime ministers have firmly adhered to a policy of restraint and have kept a low nuclear profile. Despite Israel's undeniable nuclear resolve, no Israeli government has seriously considered changing, or even modifying, Israel's policy of opacity. All have complied with the Nixon-Meir deal that the Israeli bomb should remain invisible. Israel has never sought legitimacy—at home or abroad—for its “bomb in the basement.” This has made Israel a special kind of proliferator.

The strong instinct of Israeli policy makers, both elected and senior professionals, is to keep the continuity rather than pursue change. If the policy of opacity has been so successful, why change it? Continuity is known, familiar, and proven, while change is unknown and full of risks. But things are not as they used to be. While the instinct for continuity remains strong, there is also a fundamental and growing recognition that the nation's way of doing business on the nuclear issue is facing new and difficult challenges that ultimately may lead to fundamental changes in Israel's nuclear policy and posture. Those concerns have evolved gradually, but Iran's nuclear ambitions give the issue a sense of urgency.

By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Israel's nuclear policy and posture will be at a crossroads. There are strong indications that a new nuclear order is looming on the horizon, in the region and possibly beyond it, which may force Israel to rethink the fundamentals of its own nuclear future. As of this writing, these developments are far from being conclusive, mature, or exhaustive—it is all a work in progress—but they are already forcing Israel to rethink and adapt; and it is possible that Israel will have to adopt a completely new outlook and posture.

### *The Iranian Nuclear Threat*

First and foremost among the new challenges is the advent of Iran as a nuclear power that soon could pose a direct existential threat to Israel. Whether the Israeli posture of nuclear deterrence will remain in its opaque and undeclared mode depends, to a large extent, on the developments on the Iranian nuclear scene. The closer Iran gets to the bomb, or to the technical ability to produce a bomb, the more likely it is that Israel would find itself compelled to change some of its fundamental parameters. The advent of a nuclear Iran has the potential to profoundly affect Israel's thinking on the nuclear question, especially its opaque nuclear posture.

From an Israeli perspective, the existential threat of the Iranian nuclear situation lies in the link between two critical elements: (1) Iran's determined and vigorous pursuit of nuclear weapon capability, and (2) the extreme hostility of the Iranian regime toward Israel. It is this link between extreme ideological hostility and nuclear weapons that elevates the concern over the Iranian nuclear problem to an existential threat.

On the question of Iran's nuclear pursuit, Israel has a high degree of confidence that Iran's intentions and aspirations are directed toward nuclear weapons, or at least an advanced nuclear weapon "option"—that is, the technical industrial capability to produce them quickly. According to Israeli assessments, the grandiose Iranian civil nuclear program is a cover for a determined Iranian effort to develop nuclear weapons. This assessment is based on analysis of multiple and independent sources of evidence, both open and classified. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert eloquently expressed the Israeli official position on this in a public speech on the Iranian nuclear threat in early January 2007: "For many long years, we have followed Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, in the guise of a civilian nuclear program. They are working through secret channels in a number of sites spread out across Iran. In the past few years, we have been witness to especially intense Iranian activity on two tracks—the overt and the covert" (Olmert 2007).

There is abundant evidence of the Iranian regime's extreme hostility toward Israel. Such hostility toward Israel has characterized the Iranian regime for some time, but it became more prominent after the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the president of Iran in 2005 (Chubin 2006). In highly publicized statements President Ahmadinejad has denied the occurrence of the Holocaust, questioned the legitimacy of Israel as a state, and, most disturbingly, repeatedly expressed a desire that Israel be "wiped off the map."<sup>13</sup>

The Israeli public—both leadership and citizenry—listens carefully to those statements. This extreme rhetoric is taken in Israel as more than outrageous but meaningless talk by an irresponsible leader. It is viewed as a true expression of the Iranian regime's desire to see the end of Israel. From a historical perspective, this is a return to the pan-Arab discourse about the destruction of the Zionist entity—a discourse that hardly exists anymore in the Sunni Arab world (some would argue due, in part, to the existence of the Israeli bomb). However, Iran's nuclear ambitions make the new statements even more ominous than their precursors. The difference between the anti-Israeli rhetoric of Ben-Gurion's era and today's is that now, for the first time, such threats are voiced by a president of a state that is pursuing the nuclear route.

Furthermore, President Ahmadinejad's rhetoric was made against the background of growing Iranian involvement in other parts of the Middle East, in particular through the Hezbollah in Lebanon and in the Palestinian territories. Iran's activities in the Middle East, in particular its involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli

conflict, are aimed at instigating regional instability and are driven by its pursuit of Shiite hegemonic aspirations in the Middle East.<sup>14</sup>

*The Public Impact on Israel: The Politics of Nuclear Fear*

A new generation of Israelis is reminded once again—what previous generations of Israelis had recognized in theory but tended to dismiss as unreal—of the existential vulnerability of Israel to nuclear threat. They are reminded that one bomb could cast a grave shadow on the future of Israel (Morris 2007). The old argument from the early 1960s about the fragility and instability of nuclear deterrence has resurfaced with a vengeance. It has opened the door to a new nuclear politics of fear.

Israel's nuclear deterrent is a well-established reality, and Iran's nuclear pursuit is still uncertain, so one might expect Israelis to feel both confident and secure. But this is not so. Israel's nuclear deterrence provides only limited peace of mind to Israelis. Sociologically speaking, the Iranian nuclear effort has elevated the collective sense of existential anxiety in Israel to new heights. A poll published in Israel in September 2006 found that 79 percent of Israeli Jews believed Iran posed a genuine threat to Israel's existence. Another poll, published two months later, found that 66 percent of Israeli Jews were convinced Iran would develop a nuclear weapon and try to use it against Israel.<sup>15</sup> A new politics of fear has introduced a burst of anxiety as if the nation is on the eve of another Holocaust.<sup>16</sup> A number of prominent Israelis have called on the international community to treat President Ahmadinejad as another Hitler.<sup>17</sup> After the Holocaust, it is said, Israeli leaders cannot ignore such outlandish threats.

Not many nations in today's world have an existential anxiety about their future. Israel is among the very few, perhaps the only one. An array of respectable national sources of information and opinion—politicians, parliamentarians, academics, and columnists—have all contributed to this new politics of fear based on an imminent reality of the Iranian nuclear threat.<sup>18</sup>

It is in response to this new politics of fear that Prime Minister Olmert delivered a sober message in January 2007, combining both resolve and caution. While a nuclear Iran could become an existential danger to Israel, that danger is not there yet, he said: "As serious as the Iranian threat is, the threat of nuclear attack on Israel is by no means imminent." Olmert referred somewhat obliquely to the time dimension of the Iranian threat: "At this stage, there is still time, while not unlimited, to stop Iran's intention of becoming a nuclear power which threatens its adversaries, first and foremost Israel. We are not complacent, we cannot be complacent, and we are responding to the Iranian threats with the necessary seriousness" (Olmert 2007).<sup>19</sup> Prime Minister Olmert made it clear that during that window of time Israel's strong preference is to reach a solution (elsewhere he used the word *compromise*) through diplomatic means. Olmert did not elaborate on

what would constitute a solution that would meet Israeli concerns—that is, the minimum requirements on which there can be no compromise—but he did make clear that the general principle is that “Iran cannot be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons or the material to produce them” (Olmert 2007).

From an Israeli national security perspective, the existential threat issue does not lie merely in the possibility that Iran would attack Israel with nuclear weapons. Israelis do acknowledge that Iran is very unlikely to attack Israel out of the blue with nuclear weapons and that Iran is fully aware of the catastrophic consequences to Iran of such a demonic act. To drop a bomb on Israel would be insane and unthinkable. (But rational or not, nuclear nightmares do not leave citizenry and leaders calm.) Still, the existential issue manifests itself on two other fronts. The first is the inherent dangers involved in the formation of a nuclear balance of terror between Iran and Israel, given the Iranian regime’s hostility toward Israel and the lack of communication between the two states.<sup>20</sup> Israelis do not want to live under a MAD regime with Iran.

The second is the impact that a balance of terror might have on Israel’s citizens and their social psyche. Some Israeli public figures who push the politics of nuclear fear, such as Deputy Minister of Defense Ephraim Sneh, have made the point that Iran might be able to “wipe the Zionist state off the map” without actually dropping a bomb. The mere existence of the Iranian nuclear bomb, or the fear that Iran has the bomb, they argue, might lead Israelis to leave Israel for a friendlier place where their very existence is not threatened. After the Holocaust, Sneh argues, Jews would have no stomach to live in the shadow of an Iranian bomb, another Holocaust. Those who had the means to leave would leave. Few Israelis would dismiss this way of thinking as too far-fetched.

### Closing Reflections

As of this writing, the Iranian nuclear situation is fluid and highly uncertain even to speculate about how it will sort itself out. But whatever the outcome, it will surely have an enormous impact on Israel’s nuclear policies of resolve and caution. Whether the future will be on the side of continuity or change depends on the outcome of that challenge and Israel’s response to it.

In the following list, I identify some of the conceptual issues that Israeli decision makers will have to grapple with in the coming years. The issues are conceptually distinct, but they are also interconnected. I highlight these issues by presenting them as questions.

- *Success or failure in halting Iran.* Can the international community succeed in denying the Iranian bomb? Could a working compromise be worked out? If so, what would be its political and technical parameters?

- *Preempting or not preempting Iran.* At the end of the window, whatever the outcome may be, Israel would be required to decide whether it could live with a nuclear Iran. In particular, Israel would have to decide whether to take preemptive action. Israel would have to make a fundamental strategic choice between prevention and deterrence. This dilemma would test Israel's commitment to the 1981 "Begin doctrine": the commitment to take preventive action, including military action, against any hostile neighbor in proximity to the bomb. Whatever action Israel took or decided not to take would have far-reaching consequences for the region and for Israel itself.
- *The disclosure dilemma: if, when, and how.* Should Israel keep its nuclear opacity policy or should it move to a declared nuclear deterrent posture? What would trigger such a dramatic change? Would Israel conduct a nuclear test? It is nearly certain, according to Israeli conventional wisdom, that an Iranian nuclear test would require Israel to follow suit. But the situation would be more ambiguous if Iran were perceived to have acquired the bomb opaquely, without officially acknowledging it, and from within the NPT. One thing is clear, once Israel removed its layers of opacity, it would no longer be a *benign proliferator* as we know it now. Israel and Iran would be more like India and Pakistan.
- *Upgrading Israel's nuclear deterrence posture.* What operational steps would Israel have to take to retain a robust and credible deterrence against nuclear Iran? Should Israel develop and announce a second-strike nuclear capability? Will Israel imitate the U.S. triad, as India does? What would be the implications of these developments on Israel's nuclear infrastructure? What would be the implications of such a transformation on the command and control systems?
- *Arms control and disarmament.* If the rivalry between Iran and Israel moved further toward the nuclear level, would the two countries be more likely to establish a dialogue to avoid inadvertent or accidental use? What types of arms control dialogue could be developed among Israel and other nuclear powers in the Middle East? Would the dangers of a nuclear Middle East renew political efforts to establish direct dialogue? What about the cause of disarmament and NWFZ?

Although the future is uncertain, one thing is evident: the challenge is enormous. Israel is already in the midst of transforming itself for a new strategic era, but so far it has not firmly sealed its bargain with the bomb. The Israeli nuclear case is *sui generis*, both domestically and internationally. But could Israel transform its strategic posture much further without changing its long-standing sui

generis character? Will this legacy continue? Part of the uncertainty is how Israel's historical commitment to those two opposing forces—resolve and caution—will play out.

## Notes

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1. SIPRI Yearbook 2006, for example, ranks Israel as the fourth nuclear nation in the world in terms of its deployed weapons in active service, just below France but above the United Kingdom and China. The two recent declared nuclear weapon states, India and Pakistan, lag behind Israel in the SIPRI rankings.

2. Most scholars who worked on the subject acknowledge these methodological difficulties. In a recent article Alan Dowty made the following comment: "Israel's nuclear weapon program, including both actual weapon production and defense policies governing their deployment and possible use, is extremely problematic as a subject for academic research. The reasons for this, according to conventional wisdom, are too obvious to require comment and too sensitive to allow it" (Dowty, 2005: 3).

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3. Ben Gurion never acknowledged publicly that the nuclear project was about security, so it is impossible also to find direct public statements that link the nuclear project with the Holocaust. Yet, behind the veil, those links do exist. Ben Gurion's correspondence with President Kennedy in the period 1962–63, especially in response to Kennedy's nuclear pressure, are deplete of reference to the Holocaust (Cohen, 1998a: 9–16, 120, 122).

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4. Once again, due to Israel's taboo over nuclear talk, it is nearly impossible to demonstrate straightforward and public linkage between the Holocaust and Israel's nuclear commitment. If the entire nuclear issue is unacknowledged in public, how can it be linked to the Holocaust? Yet, beyond the nuclear mist, the commitment to "Never Again" has become more apparent as a younger generation of Israelis has developed a tradition of pilgrimage to the primary Holocaust site. A few years ago the government of Poland allowed Israeli advanced F-15I to fly over Auschwitz as a symbolic gesture to the memory of the Holocaust. The official IDF web site makes a long reference to the "Never Again" speech that IDF Chief of Staff Lieutenant-General Gabi Ashkenazi delivered to his general staff at the Hall of Names at *Yad Vashem* in Jerusalem in the 2007 Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony. "We are gathered here," continued Lieutenant-General Ashkenazi, "the members of the general staff and I, in order to declare that this will never happen again . . . Almost every soldier of the IDF visited and was involved in the programs in museums such as *Yad Veshem* in order to remember and learn from the Holocaust." Available at <http://dover.idf.il/IDF/English/News/holiday/2007/april/1501.htm>.

5. In a nonscientific survey conducted in 2000 by Israel's leading newspaper *Yediot Achronot*, most respondents ranked Ben-Gurion's decision to initiate the nuclear project as Israel's "best" and most fateful decision any Israel leader has ever made.

6. This was an "excuse" for the real reasons Israel had to stay away from the NPT. The real Israeli issue was not that the system was deficient, but that the NPT was inconsistent with Israel's nuclear weapon program. Signing the NPT would have meant either giving



up a great deal of the nuclear program or engaging in a major scheme of deception and concealment. In any case, Israel's nuclear deterrence would have been reduced substantially. Israel did not want to be a recognized nonnuclear weapon state. Even if the NPT/IAEA system had been much stronger, Israel still would not have signed it. However, Israel was proved absolutely correct about the dangerous weaknesses of the safeguard system. As the Iraqi case proved twice and as the Iranian case is believed to demonstrate, the NPT safeguard system, even after the reform it has endured, cannot provide real assurance to states that are under existential threat.

7. Usually the term *nuclear taboo* commonly refers by scholars (such as Nina Tannenwald or T.V. Paul) to normative prohibition against use. Here (and elsewhere, Cohen, 2005a) I use the term in referenced to a societal sense of inhibition to speak about or even to acknowledge the possession of nuclear weapons.

8. Some words of academic caution are required. The account I present here is my own reconstruction. While I believe that it accurately reflects the essence of real decisions that Israel has made on its nuclear path, it should not be viewed as historical evidence by rigid historical standards. The actual history of such decisions is inevitably messier and more complex than any researcher's conceptual construct, but in the Israeli case the primary historical evidence is simply unavailable. Virtually none of Israel's decisions were made public. Hence my reconstruction is filled in at times by educated guesses. My goal here is not to describe history for its own sake, but rather to highlight some aspects of the portrait of Israel as a benign proliferator.

9. Subsequently, it was decided that the Israeli press would be allowed to refer to Israel's nuclear capability as a "nuclear option" or "nuclear capability," keeping the words "bomb" and "nuclear weapons" out of the public discourse. This is still the practice of the Israeli military censor today (Cohen 2005c).

10. While it is difficult to discern the specific effects of nuclear deterrence—in part, because Israel has not faced (at least since the 1973 war) real situations of existential threat—it is widely believed that Israel's nuclear deterrence helped persuade Saddam Hussein in 1991 to limit his missile attacks against Israel to conventional weapons (Feldman 1991). I should also note, however, that the case is far from being empirically or methodologically clear. Not only is it difficult to "observe" the specific effects of nuclear deterrence under opacity, but in this particular case the epistemic difficulties are compounded by the difficulty of discerning between the effects of U.S. and Israeli deterrence; both countries threatened Saddam with horrific consequences if he used unconventional weaponry.

11. It could even be argued that Israel has effectively enjoyed more freedom of action and lack of interference in its nuclear affairs than any de jure members of the nuclear club (with the possible exception of China and maybe also France). Those states, since their nuclear weapon programs were on the table, had to deal with some pressure at home (in the case of the democratic nuclear states) or some international treaties and norms. Israel, on the other hand, not only avoided making any formal obligations in the nuclear field, but it was "allowed" to keep its nuclear activities virtually "off limits" to any diplomatic discussion with any other state or international body. For all practical purposes, with the tacit support of the United States, the Israeli nuclear program has been treated as de facto "off limits," at least in terms of information.

12. Initially, Egypt insisted during the *peace process* that the peace treaty include a clause requiring Israel to join the NPT, but when Israel (and the United States) made it clear

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that this would be a nonstarter for Israel, Egypt agreed to look the other way at the Israeli nuclear issue (Quandt 1986).

13. President Ahmadinejad has also raised international outrage by making many similar statements. His assertion that Israel should be “wiped off the map” was a slogan used often by the father of the 1979 revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. On October 19, 2006, President Ahmadinejad talked again about the Holocaust, saying: “Even if we assume that six million Jews were killed in World War II, how come you don’t have sympathy for the other 54 million who were killed, too? It is not even clear who counted those you have sympathy for.” He said Israel has effectively held European countries hostage for what happened during World War II.

14. This point was central in Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s Herzelya speech in January 2007: “The Iran of today, whose leadership is motivated by religious fanaticism and ideological extremism, has chosen a policy of confrontation with us and threatens to wipe Israel off the map of nations. It supports terror and undermines stability in the region. The Iranian regime, in its aspiration to regional hegemony, bears responsibility for the riots perpetrated by the Hezbollah today to bring down the Lebanese government” (Olmert 2007).

15. Cam Simpson, “Israeli Citizens Struggle Amid Iran’s Nuclear Vow,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 22, 2006, A3.

16. The weekly magazine of the Israeli daily newspaper *Ha’aretz* indulged those fears with a five-page feature in which the editors posed the following question to prominent cultural figures: What would you do if you knew there were only two months left before Mr. Ahmadinejad dropped his atomic bomb?

17. Yossi Melamn, “Peres: Israel Has No Intention of Attacking Iran,” *Ha’aretz*, October 21, 2006. Available at <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/777440.html>.

18. In 2007, for example, a respected Israeli historian, Benny Morris, published an editorial in English and German in which he explicitly invoked the fear that Israel is approaching a second Holocaust (Morris 2007).

19. Analytically, Iran would become an existential threat to Israel only once it masters the technology to produce significant quantities of weapons-grade fissile material. It is not the building of the bomb itself, but the technology of producing the fissile material that makes Iran an “existential threat.”

20. Cam Simpson, “Israeli Citizens Struggle.”

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