



Nuclear Ambition and the Importance of Intelligence, Strategies and Politics

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Executive Summary

The Al-Kibar bombing in September 2007 was a clear demonstration of the Begin Doctrine. Although the crisis management and decision-making process of then Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is considered one of the best in Israel's history - the collection of the indisputable intelligence that made this strike possible has been problematic at best. While Israeli senior intelligence officials now acknowledge that their success was based as much on luck as on professionalism - the entire process belies the inherent pitfalls still plaguing the intelligence analysis and decision-making process concerning the acquisition of nuclear weapons by rogue states.

The same fundamental problems in intelligence collection, analysis and decision-making continue to plague the handling of the looming Iranian nuclear threat throughout the West. Applying the threat analysis criteria that Israel ended adopting in 2007 points to Iran being a nuclear power. Taken together, the audacity and self-confidence of Iran's uppermost leaders - starting with the Ayatollah Khamenei - leave no doubt they know they have the ultimate insurance against US-led efforts at regime change. Namely, Iran has the nuclear weapons and long-range strategic delivery systems to deter the US-led West.

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Analysis

Israel's Dilemma

On the night of 5/6 September 2007, the Israeli Air Force bombed and destroyed the Syrian clandestine nuclear reactor in Al-Kibar, near Deir ez-Zor in the Euphrates valley.

On 20 March 2017, Jerusalem formally acknowledged what has long been suspected - that Israel indeed destroyed the nearly-completed reactor in Syria.

The Al-Kibar bombing was a clear demonstration that the precedent set by the Menachem Begin government on 7 June 1981, when the Israeli Air Force destroyed the Tammuz I reactor in southern Baghdad, has indeed evolved into the Begin Doctrine. Simply put, Israel would not tolerate the acquisition of nuclear weapons by its declared enemies.

However, although the crisis management and decision-making process of then Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and the extremely small innermost circle is considered one of the best in Israel's history - the collection of the indisputable intelligence that made this strike possible has been problematic at best. While Israeli senior intelligence officials now acknowledge that their success was based as much on luck as on professionalism - the entire process belies the inherent pitfalls still plaguing the intelligence analysis and decision-making process concerning the acquisition of nuclear weapons by rogue states.

In retrospect, Israeli intelligence misread and misinterpreted the initial warning signs and indications because the technical intelligence inputs were examined against the then perceived political dynamics in Damascus. Although Israeli intelligence has more raw data about Syria than any other intelligence service, and although Israeli intelligence comprehends official Damascus far better than any other intelligence service - Israeli intelligence suffered then (and to a great extent still suffers) from a fundamental flaw: All studies and analyses are Israel-centric.

As well, Jerusalem has iron-strong faith in the strategic agreements with Washington - including the myriad of intelligence sharing agreements and understandings. This unshaken faith survived the crisis of 2003 when Israel was traumatized not only by the extent of the Libyan WMD program, particularly its nuclear component, about which Israeli intelligence knew precious little - but also by the fact that "our American allies" did not share with Israel the little that they had known about Libya. The Bush Jr Administration was afraid that should Israel know about Libya's strategic build-up (even at the very wanting level of US knowledge at the time) - Israel would strike Libya unilaterally and thus risk the fledgling negotiations with Muammar Qadhafi. Hence, the US did not disclose anything to Israel. The Libya case is not the only time US intelligence was instructed to deprive Israel of crucial data for fear of how Israel would use it.

Back in winter 2003/4, when the first inkling about a crisis in the Bashar al-Assad innermost circle of confidants emerged, Jerusalem analyzed the crumbs of information in the context of the Israeli-Syrian dynamics. The key criteria were Bashar al-Assad's attempts to consolidate his regime, and Syria's fear of a clash with Israel (including in Lebanon) that would derail and complicate Assad's consolidation of power. It was assumed in Jerusalem that Damascus would opt for minimal deterrence against Israel (the ability to strike Israel's deep rear) - but would largely prefer to preserve the quiet border on the Golan Heights and even revive the "peace process". Doing so, the Israeli analysis went, would help Assad to remove external challenges and even increase the flow of foreign aid, that would, in turn, enable Assad to focus inwardly and



consolidate further a stronger power-base.

This was a profound error of analysis. In winter 2003/4, Assad was mortified by the US presence and operations in Iraq. He was convinced that the US would not stop in Baghdad and that an attempt at regime change in Damascus was imminent. Any Israeli aggression would be the result of US instructions. Assad's dread was reinforced by strong pressure from Ayatollah Khamenei and Kim Jong-Il not to follow Muammar Qadhafi in trying to reason with Bush, but rather join them in adopting the ultimate insurance and deterrence - nuclear weapons.

On top, Bashar al-Assad has long been mistrustful of his own power-base - cognizant that many of the veteran close aides of his late father Hafez al-Assad considered themselves the legitimate successors (after the chosen heir, Bashar's older brother Bassel, was killed mysteriously in January 1994). In 2005, Bashar's dread of betrayal by his innermost circle reached new heights. The Bush Administration was entertaining the idea of replacing Bashar with his exiled uncle Rifaat al-Assad because Rifaat committed to suppressing and eradicating Damascus's nascent Jihadist proxies who were facilitating and supporting the flow of Jihadists, weapons and funds to fight the US forces in Iraq. When the rumors about Rifaat reached Damascus, they raised great anticipation among most senior officers of the military and intelligence services. Bashar concluded, and not without reason, that he could not fully trust the people closest to him.

This grim realization affected the specific way how Bashar al-Assad would run his nuclear program. First, when Bashar decided to go nuclear in early 2004, he agreed with Kim Jong-Il that there would be no separate agreement, but that the nuclear undertaking will fall under the 2002 Syrian-North Korean agreement on the development of strategic weapons that, at that time, only covered ballistic missiles and nerve agents. Second, most funding would go through the Iranians to further conceal any Syrian connection. Ultimately, Iran would cover some of the Syrian expenses on its own. Spending inside Syria were concealed as expenditures of the Office of the President (as done habitually with strategic projects) because these require no explanation. In principle, no military and intelligence personnel, including the Defense Minister and the Army's Chief of Staff, were told about the project.

To run the nuclear program, Bashar al-Assad decided on a very very small team that would operate completely outside the Syrian establishment and would answer to him directly. At the macro-level, the project was run by Professor Wateq Rasul Aja, the head of the Higher Council for Sciences. He oversaw a host of ostensibly academic and deniable undertakings including the opening of a new Mechanical Engineering Faculty at the University of Aleppo where specially cleared promising officers were trained and prepared for assuming control over the project.

Professor Ibrahim Othman, the head of the Syrian Atomic Energy Commission, was put in charge of supervising the actual construction of the nuclear facilities. In this capacity, Othman hosted in Al-Kibar Chon Chibu and a small delegation of North Korean experts. At the time, Chon Chibu was the chief engineer of the Yongbyon plutonium reactor. To conceal his new position, Othman was instructed to maintain his ongoing relations with the IAEA and other international fora. A woman called Aza Qeslan was nominated as Othman's chief assistant responsible for the security of the program's data/information and the sensitive facilities. As the construction progressed and the arrival of radioactive material was anticipated, Professor Muhammad al-Masri joined the project as the official responsible for nuclear safety.



The actual manager of the Syrian clandestine nuclear weapons program was Omar Amerzai - a communications engineer and a personal friend and confidant of Bashar al-Assad. Amerzai was a senior official in the Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC) that officially “belongs to the Syrian Defense Ministry, and conducts military research.” Amerzai handled the direct contacts with the North Koreans, and particularly a senior director of the North Korean nuclear weapons program known to the Syrians and Iranians as Rii/Ri Wong-Ho. To ensure complete secrecy, the entire construction of the site in Al-Kibar was handled by the KPA’s Third Engineering Unit - an elite formation that was already responsible for the construction of several military-nuclear facilities in the DPRK. The unit’s personnel and all equipment were brought to Syria in North Korean ships. Everything was unloaded under darkness and moved away into the desert before daylight.

The nuclear program had only one contact man with the Syrian vast military and intelligence establishment - General Muhammad Suleiman. A personal friend and close confidant of Bashar al-Assad, Suleiman was already in charge of the Syrian “shadow army”. As such, he was in charge of all clandestine programs involving the military and intelligence system including cooperation with Iran, the HizbAllah and Palestinian terrorist organizations. Regarding the nuclear program, Suleiman was to arrange all services - from security to transportation to clandestine communications. Moreover, his involvement meant that ongoing contacts with the Iranians and North Koreans would be attributed to other ongoing strategic programs. (Suleiman was target-killed by a sniper on 1 August 2008. He was hosting a dinner at his vacation home overlooking the Mediterranean near Tartus when a shot rang from one of fishing boats at sea.)

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The Syrian deception plan worked because it provided for an easy finger-pointing at the ballistic missiles (mainly the North Korean derivative of the SCUD D) and VX-filled warheads. Ultimately, the deception worked because Israel wanted to believe that the Syrians were not planning any fundamental strategic challenge. Fearing for a regional escalation that might further endanger and complicate the quagmire in Iraq - the US Government went out of its way to allay any Israeli fears and doubts.

In early 2004, Israeli intelligence started to note a growing volume of encrypted communications between Syria and North Korea. US Intelligence confirmed that the communications were indeed with the DPRK - mainly the Pyongyang area. However, it took Israel time to discern that some of these communications came from the Deir ez-Zor area, and not just the usual channel between Pyongyang and the al-Safir missile and chemical weapons base near Aleppo where there had long been a large presence of North Korean advisors and experts. US Intelligence opined that the North Korean communications with “a remote location in the northeast Syrian Desert” were most likely connected to the establishment of testing grounds for new ballistic missiles.

The ballistic missile angle was reinforced when, on the night of 22 April 2004, a cargo train on its way to the North Korean port of Nampo collided with a parking train and blew up near the town of Ryongchon. The cargo train exploded, creating a 200-foot deep crater with the explosion measuring 3.6 on the Richter scale. The blast destroyed nearby high-rise buildings, flattened much of the town, and hurled debris over 12 miles away. Pyongyang’s official explanation was that “a train carrying fertilizer containing ammonium nitrate and petroleum accidentally came into contact with electrical wires and exploded.” Officially, 54 people died and 1,249 were wounded. The unofficial toll stood at more than 160 dead and over 3,000 injured. Significantly, the fatalities included more than a dozen Syrian ballistic missile scientists and technicians formally employed by



the SSRC. The train, it turned out, was carrying highly sensitive rocket solid fuel to be exported to Syria.

Soon afterwards, North Korean intelligence told their Chinese counterparts that an Israeli Mossad agent (whom they identified by name and picture) traveled between Guangzhou, China, and Pyongyang at the time. Pyongyang concluded that the Mossad was in all likelihood responsible for the explosion. North Korean intelligence reported that they found a damaged cellphone still wrapped in duct tape near the explosion site. North Korea immediately and abruptly halted the entire mobile phone system (established only a few months beforehand) and confiscated the 10,000 cellphones already distributed for further investigation.

Thus, when Mohsen Fakhrizadeh-Mahabadi, then the head of Iran's 'Project 111' that fitted and installed nuclear warheads on the country's ballistic missiles, visited Damascus in mid-2005 - no special alarm went on. Israeli intelligence interpreted the visit as having to do with the Syrian-North Korean chemical warheads. The Syrians must have wanted Fakhrizadeh-Mahabadi to provide independent opinion on the North Korean missile program. The possibility that Fakhrizadeh-Mahabadi could be involved with a Syrian nuclear weapons program - advising on fitting nuclear warheads on Syrian ballistic missiles - did not seem likely in Israel.

The approach of Israeli Intelligence started to change in early 2006. This was the result of the promotion, in November 2005, of Eli Ben-Meir to full Colonel and his nomination as the commander of the technological branch of Military Intelligence. Ben-Meir was neither an "Assadologue" nor an engineer - only a veteran intelligence officer with a lot of experience in operational intelligence against the clandestine programs of Iran and the HizbAllah. As he was taking over his new post, Ben-Meir did not like the insertion of non-technical rationale into the conclusions about all weapons development programs/projects throughout the greater Middle East. He ordered a comprehensive reassessment of all pertinent projects solely on the basis of technical intelligence data.

After a conversation with a young major who noted the existence of inconclusive data about a Syrian special project - Ben-Meir established in early 2006 a special team to study the possibility of a clandestine nuclear program in Syria. A few months later, the team raised the alarm that a major program was taking place in the Syrian desert. The Syria Branch countered that it was "illogical" for Assad to shake the status quo with a nuclear program. It did not help that US intelligence, including then Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte, ridiculed the Israeli warning and argued that the US would have known had North Korea been assisting Syria with a nuclear project.

In late 2006, Ben-Meir convinced the leaders of both Military Intelligence and the Mossad to focus on the Syrian threat. Mossad Chief Meir Dagan was fixated with the Iranian nuclear program and thus reluctant to divert major resources to the vague Syrian threat. However, things started to change when, in December 2006, IRGC Brigadier General Ali-Reza Asgari defected first to the Mossad and then handed over to the CIA. Asgari provided details about the secret uranium enrichment plant in Natanz. He also told his interrogators that Iran was sponsoring and subsidizing a "huge special program" in Syria. Pressured to elaborate, Asgari suggested that Iran was "apparently funding" a top-secret nuclear project jointly run with North Korea. Asgari insisted he did not know anything else about the undertaking.

Dagan rose to the challenge and diverted top-quality resources and assets to the Syrian challenge. In the next few months, the Mossad launched a dozen or so special operations in support of the Syrian project. One of the first, in December 2006, was a break-in to a London hotel room of a senior Syrian intelligence official. The contents of his computer were disappointing but suggested that something was going on. Subsequent



operations did not yield much either. Meir Dagan was ready to throw the towel. Then, in early March 2007, the Mossad struck gold. A team broke into the Vienna hotel room of Ibrahim Othman who was visiting the IAEA Headquarters. They were able to copy the hard-drive of his laptop. This was the “golden data” - numerous color pictures taken inside the building that proved that it was a plutonium nuclear reactor with many of the same engineering elements as the North Korean reactor in Yongbyon. There were also pictures of Othman with Chon Chibu and other visiting North Korean experts, as well as engineering drawings and notes.

There begun hectic preparations to destroy the nuclear reactor in Al-Kibar before it got hot. Unlike Begin, who kept the Americans in the dark in 1980-1, Olmert decided to appraise and consult with the Bush White House every step of the way. Initially, the White House doubted the validity of the Israeli findings. The US then warned that any Israeli attack would spark a regional war with dire implications for the US forces in Iraq and the region as a whole. The US objected to an ensuing Israeli suggestion that the US bomb the site to prevent such an escalation. In July 2007, President Bush formally decided not to attack. Washington increased the pressure on Jerusalem in order to dissuade Israel from taking unilateral steps.

Then, on 3 September, a North Korean ship named ‘Al Hamed’ arrived at Tartus. According to the manifest, the ship was carrying cement. However, the tight security around the ship, the unloading and the trucks convinced Israeli Intelligence that the ‘Al Hamed’ delivered “key nuclear material for the plutonium weapons plant.” It became imperative to strike quickly before the reactor was fueled. The Bush White House was notified. The next day, “US officials” briefed a Fox News correspondent and sent him to submit a Freedom of Information Act request for information about a Syrian nuclear reactor. The Pentagon notified the Israeli Embassy.

On 5 September, Olmert convened the Security Cabinet and decided to strike immediately for fear that a leak would compromise the operation. That night, four F-15s of Squadron 69, and four F-16s (two of Squadron 119 and two of Squadron 253) dropped, in slightly over 60 seconds, more than 18 tons of bombs on the reactor in Al-Kibar - destroying it completely. (In 2016, Ben-Meir, then a Brigadier General and the Head of Research of Military Intelligence, resigned in protest over the conduct of research, assessment and threat analysis throughout the Israeli Intelligence Community. His main point was that political considerations were once again influencing what should be independent and unencumbered work of experts, analysts and researchers.)

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Intelligence Analysis and Assessment

The Israeli after-action study and analysis of the operation harshly criticized the intelligence community. Senior Mossad leaders, including former chief Tamir Pardo (who was Dagan’s deputy in 2007), called the work of the Israeli Intelligence Community a “resounding failure”. Had the Syrians succeeded to complete the reactor - and they were pretty close by the time it was bombed - the intelligence failure would have been considered “worse than Yom Kippur” (that is, the Israeli intelligence failure, because of faulty analysis and hubris, to recognize the Egyptian and Syrian preparations for the Yom Kippur War in October 1973 that is considered a traumatic experience in Israel). The intelligence community woke up right in time to deliver the complete picture that enabled Olmert to decide on the strike and enabled the Air Force to plan, train for and execute a perfect bombing operation. That waking up, however, had more to do with luck than gray ordinary intelligence collection and analysis. No state, least of all Israel, can rely on luck in such crucial matters.



The in-depth analysis and lesson learning accepted that conclusive technical data might not be readily available in cases of extremely sensitive projects and extensive deception. Thus, even in cases where there is extensive technological intelligence about national-strategic projects, viable proof of the most crucial issue - for example, whether the threshold was crossed or operational capacity attained - might be lacking. In the case of Israel, policy formulation, resource allocation, risk taking and decision-making are all derived from the analysis and perception of viable threat - both existing and/or in the making. Ultimately, however, governments in Jerusalem cannot be beholden to the certitude of technological intelligence. Near-complete intelligence picture is always desirable - but must not be a precondition. Moreover, any special efforts to retrieve such near-complete technical data should be prompted not by analysis of what is ostensibly in the interest of enemy leader(s), as perceived by Israeli experts, but by closely following the other-side leader(s) and the patterns of their behavior and decision-making.

In the case of nuclear weapons and long-range strategic strike capabilities - the core issue is their primary role as the ultimate insurance against regime change and comparable threats to the leader(s). Thus, what Israel disregarded was Bashar al-Assad's earlier dread of regime change, and then his growing self-confidence. Significantly, both perceptions were prompted by Bashar's reading of the US and Western intentions - not Israel's. As discussed above, in 2004, Bashar dreaded a regime change following the toppling of Saddam Hussein. However, Bashar al-Assad's self-confidence was gradually restored during 2005. This was first manifested in the escalation of involvement in, and sponsorship of, the anti-US Jihad in Iraq. Damascus was audacious to the point of permitting higher profile to Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri and other Iraqi leaders of the anti-American war. Bashar also disregarded the defection, in the second half of 2005, of then Vice-President Abdul Halim Khaddam (a Sunni Arab with roots in eastern Syria) and the efforts by the French, Egyptians and Saudis to empower him in Syria.

At the time, Bashar was confident that nothing could happen to him in the long-term because he was so close to acquiring the ultimate insurance. Israeli intelligence could, and should, have noticed Assad's swing from despair and dread to self-confidence and optimism. In the world of rogue regimes, this could only mean that Bashar al-Assad either already acquired the ultimate insurance or was convinced the acquisition was imminent and irreversible. This swing alone should have prompted Israeli intelligence to launch a thorough search for the ultimate insurance.

Meanwhile, Syria and its allies attribute the US instigation of the riots of 2011, that, in turn, evolved into the still unfolding fratricidal civil war. Damascus points out in particular to the mantra of the US-led West - "Assad Must Go!" - as the direct ramifications of the denial by Israel of him having nuclear weapons and the ultimate insurance.

As distinct from Damascus, both Tehran and Pyongyang exude self-confidence in dealing with the rest of the world. While Pyongyang bases this confidence on declared nuclear and delivery capabilities, Tehran declares strategic delivery capabilities but hints on nuclear capacity while officially sticking to the JCPOA. For example, Iran warns that it can return to 20% enrichment of uranium within 48 hours after a cancellation of JCPOA.

However, with both countries, US and Western policies are beholden to intelligence assessments of their precise military-technological capabilities. In official Washington, the imperative for concrete decision-making has long been avoided under the pretext that certain capabilities must be verified before policy formulation can take place. Hence, the logic goes for decades now, there is no need for facing paramount challenges until such time that intelligence verification compels confronting unpleasant issues. Politicians and leaders justify



the avoidance of confronting reality by hiding behind the intelligence debates whether certain countries do or don't have specific minor capacities and/or some esoteric sub-sub-systems.

In so doing, US and Western leaders and politicians blur the fine yet critical line between intelligence analysis and assessment, and between threat analysis and crisis management.

Intelligence analysis and assessment are the quintessential products of the intelligence community. They are based on the successes, expertise and inherent limitations of any intelligence community or alliance. There is no 100% certitude in intelligence. "We've never been able to find what the enemy has succeeded to conceal," is a known mantra. The intelligence community always grapples with partial information, dubious reliability of sources, holes in the narratives, etc. Growing reliance on technological collection is countered by deception and concealment. The race for access is never won completely.

Yet, experts and analysts ultimately succeed to make sense of the multitudes of details and come up with a coherent assessment. More often than not, this is a conclusion based on probability - not a certainty. The intelligence community is convinced that, in all likelihood, so-and-so is the case. That such assessments are the result of unimaginable quests for the acquisition of multitude of facts and details, and of immense expertise in making sense of these findings, does not change the grim reality that these are the best assessments possible - not certainties.

Threat analysis transforms the intelligence assessment into national policy. Threat analysis addresses the ramifications of the intelligence assessment being correct and of it being wrong. Israel, for example, can make only one mistake - its last. Striking the greater Tel-Aviv area with one or two nuclear weapons all but finishes off the state. Hence, and this is the crux of the Begin Doctrine, Israel cannot afford the luxury of being wrong. Intelligence assessments not verifying full capabilities and/or ill-intents are what they are - assessments. Israeli leaders cannot take the chance of these assessments being wrong. The moment there are credible indications of a viable strategic threat - Israel should preempt. Simply put, Israeli leaders are obligated to act when certain capabilities emerge in the context of hostile doctrines and national behavior.

Ultimately, when there is doubt or unclarity over the veracity and/or accuracy of a technological assessment - the patterns of behavior of the leader(s) should become the key to working threat analysis and, if preventive efforts fail, to crisis management. Leaders and countries obfuscate, even cheat and use disinformation - but they don't bluff about nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons, to remind, are not for use but for scaring. Real and imaginary nemeses should be scared and/or affected by the image of viable nuclear threat one projects. Hence, the national stakes are too high for taking risks with bluffs. No leader(s) can be completely certain that there are no penetrations of their inner circles by foreign intelligence. Hence, any pretending of non-existing capabilities always carries of the risk that the nemeses know this is pretension with no backing. The nemeses might exploit the gap in real deterrence to strike out preemptively before it is too late. Furthermore, no leader(s) can be certain that one's audacious self-confident policies and challenging will not be countered with a very harsh reaction. Hence, leader(s) do not provoke their own need for ultimate insurance until they really have acquired some of that ultimate insurance.

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Iran's and North Korea's Threat Perception and Cooperation

The acquisition of nuclear weapons and strategic delivery systems by Iran and North Korea is rooted in their irreconcilable hostility to the Western-dominated world order, and their determination to challenge it at all cost. Their urgent imperative is ultimately to establish credible deterrence against US-led Western intervention and regime change.

Thus, the rogues' quest for nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles started in the 1980's with close cooperation for both political and strategic-technological reasons. Pakistan, Iran and North Korea were leading the technological effort, while Libya lavishly funded the undertakings through both direct and clandestine venues (including the illegal acquisition of technologies in the West). As well, Chinese technology, radioactive materials and subsystems were provided to Pakistan as part of their special relations and determination to prevent Pakistan from falling completely under US influence. Some China-origin technologies and subsystems were then transferred by Pakistan to the rogue allies - Iran, North Korea and Libya. Meanwhile, North Korean missile technology was shared with Pakistan.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 1990-91 Gulf Crisis, there grew the apprehension of a coming US-led Western suppression of the rogue states as a component of the new era of Pax-Americana. In May 1990, Pakistan put the perception to a test - instigating and provoking a nuclear crisis with India that brought Washington into intervening and changing policy solely for fear of nuclear escalation. The success of the Pakistani gambit, coupled with fears of US interventionism in the wake of the Gulf Crisis, led the rogue governments to commit to acquiring doomsday capabilities as measures of last resort protection of the leaders and their regimes. Beijing was the first to identify the significance of these decisions as a long-term strategic mega-trend. Beijing exploited this phenomenon in the early 1990's while starting the Chinese ascent into the realm of global superpower.

By now, the strategic-nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea were increasingly integrated to the point that it became nearly impossible to tell where one national program ended and the other began. Meanwhile, in the aftermath of the Gulf Crisis Iran launched an all-out effort to purchase operational nuclear weapons and military knowhow from the former Soviet Central Asia. Iran succeeded in early-1992 - crossing an irreversible threshold for all the rogue regimes. There followed a joint effort with North Korea to acquire a large number of SCUD warheads from an ex-Soviet bunker in Siberia (which contributed to the discovery of the Iran-made \$100 super-notes). Concurrently, the North Koreans focused on launching indigenous production with know-how received from Pakistan as well as Iranian-North Korean espionage in the West. The North Korean progress was gradually shared with Iran. North Korea reached initial operational status in the early-1990's. Encouraged, North Korea also acquired, mainly from Pakistan, nuclear technologies needed by Iran in order to develop their own indigenous warheads on the basis of the nuclear infrastructure and knowhow then existing in Iran.

Stymied in its efforts to produce operational nuclear weapons, Iran kept purchasing nuclear weapons and specialty delivery systems during the 1990's. These included SCUD warheads that were sent to North Korea for up-grading as well as anti-shiping cruise missiles. Iran went to great length preparing for a possible nuclear challenge to the enduring US presence in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula. Iran shared the acquired weapons, technologies and overall know-how with its partners and especially China in return for self-production capacity and military technologies including ballistic, cruise and underwater missiles.



The widespread dread of the US-led Western assertiveness continued to grow at the onset of the 21st Century. Indeed, the US championed both military offensives - particularly the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq with the stated objective to disarm Saddam Hussein - and political coercion - particularly the inducement of Muammar Qadhafi to self-disarm in return for being embraced by the West. The question of credible nuclear capabilities loomed high for the rogue leaders.

Hence, the rogue states markedly accelerated the race to mature strategic-military capabilities and indigenous warheads in quantities and qualities far exceeding concurrent Western estimates. By the mid-2000's, these efforts culminated in the establishment of dedicated national command structures, a mature doctrine for nuclear offensives as demonstrated in both Iranian and North Korean command post and communications exercises starting 2004-5, ballistic missile surprise attack capabilities as exercised starting 2006, and jointly-developed warheads (tested in North Korea). Equally important was the Iran-led development of anti-US Navy defenses through denial - from swarming to nuclear anti-carrier strikes - that was shared with North Korea. The efforts by North Korea and Iran to help Syria acquire nuclear warheads were cut short by the Israeli air strike in September 2007. The concurrent US-led international ignoring of both the build-up and repeated violations under the guise of negotiation processes only emboldened the rogue alliance. Indeed, Iranian and North Korean military documents asserted that senior officers must ignore the reports of deals and understandings with the US-led West.

Starting the 2010's, leaders in Pyongyang and Tehran resolved to consolidate strategic political posture that, in turn, would guarantee the regimes' survival against all threats and odds, their ability to surge regionally, and even to wage vindictive regional wars (the DPRK's Glorious Juche War and Iran's War on Oil) in case of US-led threats to the regimes and their vital interests. Tehran focused on expediting self-production capabilities and improving strategic military capabilities. Pyongyang focused on being able to deliver nuclear strikes on the US (from ballistic missiles and their warheads, to EMP-warheads installed on satellites, to nuclear Special Forces). The February 2013 nuclear test in North Korea was a demonstration of a common DPRK and Iranian operationally-ready nuclear weapon - the payload "nipple" on the Iranian and DPRK ballistic missiles. There were significant numbers of Iranians present at the test site, and there was a large satcom terminal near the entrance to the test site (which was unusual) that transmitted data and reports to Tehran in real time.

Ultimately, the top priorities of the rogue leaders in both Tehran and Pyongyang remain self-survival and self-preservation. When the leaders in Tehran and Pyongyang study the US proposals regarding their own nuclear weapons programs they remember three things: First, it's an article of faith that had Saddam Hussein had "The Bomb" in 1991 and 2003 - President Bush Sr would not have dared to evict Iraq from Kuwait and President Bush Jr would not have dared to invade Iraq and topple Saddam. Second, Muammar Qadhafi believed the assurances of Bush Jr, made a deal with the US and disarmed fully, and then President Obama capitalized on this weakness to topple and kill Qadhafi and his family. Three, President Obama capitalized on the Israeli destruction of the Syrian nuclear program in order to try and unseat Bashar al-Assad, instigating the still unfolding region-wide fratricidal carnage and wars. Therefore, nobody at the top of Tehran and Pyongyang is going to surrender their real capabilities and thus their guarantees of survival against a hated and mistrusted US-led West no matter how cajoling and enticing they might be.

In recent years, particularly in the aftermath of JCPOA, Washington's declaratory policy has been that the US and allies will not permit Iran to become a nuclear power. The crux of the Iranian military nuclear program has been to move from dependence on imported Plutonium-based warheads from the DPRK to self-produced



Uranium-based warheads because Iran has huge Uranium deposits all over the country. The February 2013 nuclear test demonstrated that such a warhead was developed. Whether Iran established a clandestine production line for such warheads is an open question. There is no doubt that JCPOA constrained Iran's ability to enrich large quantities of Uranium, but Iranian senior officials have repeatedly stated that Iran can resume enrichment within 48 hours should the Supreme Leader decides so. Furthermore, the formal entry to the JCPOA did not change the availability of DPRK-origin Plutonium-base warheads and increasingly accurate longer-range ballistic missiles in underground launch-caves.

Rhetoric notwithstanding, US intelligence has long been cognizant of this reality. In March 2009, the then Director of National Intelligence, Adm. (rtd.) Dennis Blair, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee that the US could not "rule out that Iran has acquired from abroad or will acquire in the future a nuclear weapon or enough fissile material for a weapon". This was an almost-confirmation that Iran had, indeed, acquired nuclear weapons from external suppliers.

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Iran's Intervention throughout the Greater Middle East, South and Central Asia

Meanwhile, since the early 2010's, Iran has intensified its interventions throughout the greater Middle East, South and Central Asia. The Mullahs in Tehran are cognizant that their relentless and audacious drive for consolidating regional hegemony and changing the overall correlation of forces throughout the greater Middle East, and to a lesser extent also Central and South Asia, are bound to provoke resistance and dread. These, in turn, could prompt both great and regional powers to attempt regime change in Tehran as a decisive drastic counter-measure. Hence the accelerated quest for the ultimate insurance. Indeed, the marked increase of the audacity and self-confidence of Tehran has corresponded to the improvement in Iran's long-range strike and nuclear capabilities.

Iran's recent actions speak volumes. Iran established an on-land bridge to the Mediterranean and is now confident in its ability to sustain it against foreign interventions. Tehran consolidated partial hegemony over the entire Iraq-Syria-Lebanon space. To the south, Iran announced its intent to topple the House of al-Saud and establish the "Sharifat Ali" over the Holy Shrines in Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. (The term "Sharifat Ali" is very precise, inflammatory, and does not leave any doubt.) Iran can also block all maritime traffic through both the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Throughout, Iranian and proxy forces have escalated and expanded their operations confident that the US-led West, including Israel, would not dare to challenge, let alone threaten, Tehran. Iranian leaders are convinced that no force in the world can prevent by force the ascent of the Islamic Republic, let alone topple the Mullahs' regime.

Presently, Iranian leaders continue to publicly raise the ante regarding Iran's objectives and invulnerability to retribution. Special emphasis is put on directly challenging both the US and Israel. "Today, America wants to dismantle countries. The plot of the New Middle East [involves] breaking up countries, and Iran opposes this [actively]," explained Khamenei Advisor Ali Akbar Velayati on 1 February 2018. "Our presence in the region is inevitable. We will continue this process, so as to become the most decisive force in the region. We are present in Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon, at the behest of and in coordination with the governments of these countries. We help Yemen because it is our human duty to do so. Saudi Arabia must know that this ongoing process will make Yemen its Vietnam."



In mid-March, several senior officers of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) warned against putting Iran's deterrence to the test even as Iran was embarking on decisive undertakings such as the destruction of Israel. "Our country has crossed the boundaries of technological containment and our defense power is not up for negotiation and may not be stopped," IRGC Deputy Commander Brigadier General Hossein Salami stated. "Containing our defense power is out of [other] countries' control." "Today, the world has come to this conclusion that the Islamic Republic of Iran's Armed Forces enjoy a very high deterrence power and the remarks and admission of the US officials also confirm this claim," noted the Commander of the IRGC's Navy Rear Admiral Ali Fadavi.

Special emphasis was put on a strategic confrontation with Israel. "At present, the development and deepening of Iran's regional power has made any decision to confront the Islamic Republic difficult which will be followed by unimaginable costs," the Commander of Khatam ol-Anbia Headquarters Major General Gholam Ali Rashid warned. "Today, the Zionist regime has more than in the past understood the Islamic Republic of Iran's power in the region and will avoid testing it because it cannot manage confrontation against Iran and cannot bear its costs." He further "advised the US" to avoid sinking into the inevitable quagmire that will result from a US decision "to create crisis and wage military war by Israel."

Speaking on the anniversary of the target-killing of the HizbAllah's Imad Mughniyeh, the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force Major General Qassem Soleimani warned Israel of the impending decisive confrontation with Iran. Israeli leaders "know, but must more seriously know, that the qisas [blood vengeance, avenging, retribution] of Imad and all the Imads who've been martyred in Palestine, Lebanon and Iran is not the firing of a missile and killing someone," Soleimani explained. "The qisas of these bloods is the destruction of the child-killing Zionist regime, and this is a certain matter."

In his Nowruz New Year address, on 22 March 2018, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei reiterated both Iran's regional ascent and resolve to confront all nemeses. "The Islamic Republic of Iran has succeeded in neutralizing US plans in the region," he stated. Khamenei accused the US of nefarious plotting that include "creating oppressive and rebel groups like D'ISH to distract people in the region from the Zionist regime and keep them occupied with internal conflicts." Khamenei has no doubt about the outcome of the forthcoming escalation. "Without a doubt, the United States will not reach its goals in the region, and, thank God, we will achieve ours."

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Taken together, the audacity and self-confidence of Iran's uppermost leaders - starting with the Ayatollah Khamenei - leave no doubt they know they have the ultimate insurance against US-led efforts at regime change. Namely, Iran has the nuclear weapons and long-range strategic delivery systems to deter the US-led West. Iranian media showed the launching of long-range ballistic missiles from concealed underground sites in the mountains. These missiles had "nipple" tips similar to those of North Korean nuclear missiles. The Iranian launcher-pads shown were similar to those of the North Korean nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles.

Meanwhile, having studied the Israeli surgical strikes in both Iraq and Syria, the Iranians have built a huge redundant nuclear program spread all over their vast country, as well as having key components duplicated in North Korea. With the key components in Iran shielded by camouflage and disinformation - it is highly likely that the US-led West, including Israel, does not know about all key installations. In spring 2018, the huge Iranian nuclear and strategic weapons program is so dispersed and well-fortified - it can only be defeated by a



protracted large-scale campaign. Like their North Korean counterparts, the Iranian strategic infrastructure is immune to a few surgical strikes.

As well, the conventional retaliation Iran is capable of inflicting instantaneously will, among other things, completely destroy the entire oil and gas infrastructure (from wells to refineries to seaports) throughout Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula. Such strikes will gravely hurt global economy - but will devastate the local countries. Iran-controlled Shiite insurrections will topple the local Sunni Arab regimes. The US and its European allies are located far away from Iran. To strike out at the Iranian strategic infrastructure they would have to rely on access to military facilities in neighboring countries. Given the immensity of the promised retaliation - can local countries be expected to commit suicide on behalf of US policies? Should they?

Alas, official Washington continues to study the enduring merits of the JCPOA, to ponder the impact of new sanctions on Iran, and to pressure Israel “not to do anything foolish” in the region.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

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