

A New Take on the Iranian-Israeli Conflict

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The New Persian Empire

Israel and Iran enjoyed a friendly and mutually beneficiary relationship during the 1970s, which was halted by the Islamic revolution.¹ The “golden age” then turned into a “cold war,” which marked the beginning of the Iranian-Israeli conflict.

Israel, the modern Jewish state, and Iran, the ancient Persian one, are two old civilizations with deep roots in the Middle East. The Persian Empire was obviously much vaster than the Jewish entity, and in its heyday extended throughout what would later be known as the Middle East, encompassing even the Land of Israel.

Since the early 1980s, Iran has tried to export its model for Islamic revolution, striving to become a hegemonic force in the Middle East. Iran also hoped to restore the glory of the ancient Persian Empire, which is such an important part of Iran's history and a source of national pride. A great Persian civilization had existed long before the original Muslims stormed out of Arabia and conquered Persia, converting the Persians to Islam in the process.

The Persians, with all their influence on Islam, were never the political center of the Islamic world, as Iran strives to be now. The new Persian Empire aspires to be a kind of modern-day version of the ancient Persian and Muslim Empires combined.

In 538 BCE, Cyrus, who became king of ancient Persia and turned it into an empire, permitted Jews to leave their Babylonian exile and return to their ancient homeland. Since 2005, the president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has repeatedly proclaimed his intention of destroying the Jewish state and expelling the Jews from their country. Although Iranian leaders before Ahmadinejad expressed their hostility toward Israel, his declarations, at least judging by the effect they had, emphasize the Iranian desire to negate Israel's right to exist in the Middle East. According to this Iranian vision, some Israeli Jews, as well as Iranian ones, might be allowed to stay in the region and have certain religious, cultural and

political rights, but, as in the situation 2,500 years ago, they would be bound to submit to the new Persian Empire. This policy arose from the traditional Persian perspective that held that nations like the Jews differ from the Persians not only in terms of their religion, but also their miniscule size. As such, they could be no match for the Persians. Obviously, as with the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Iranians have an overwhelming advantage due to the size of their population and territory, but that did not guarantee superiority to the Arabs and would not do so for Iran either.

Iranians should also remember that the ancient Persian Empire fell to a smaller nation that had better armed forces.² Israel and the IDF might also prove to be such a foe. Naturally, in contrast to Alexander the Great, king of Macedonia, the IDF could not conquer a state as vast as Iran, which is also very remote from Israel; however, like the Macedonian Phalanx, the IDF also includes extremely effective units. First and foremost of these is the Israeli Air Force, which could reach Iran and inflict heavy punishment upon it.

Nuclear Weapons

Israel is known to have a nuclear arsenal.³ Iran is eager to hold this ultimate unconventional weapon too, possibly for the same reason as Israel, as a last-resort measure.⁴ Israel's position that it cannot afford to allow Iran enough time to also obtain the bomb stands in contrast to that of the United States vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in the late 1940s. By 1949, the USSR had detonated its first atomic bomb and proceeded to rapidly develop nuclear weapons.

If Iran were to acquire the bomb, there would be a balance of deterrence between Tehran and Jerusalem, since Iran is cognizant of the ramifications of using such a weapon against Israel.⁵ This could be a Middle Eastern version of a situation of mutually assured destruction (MAD). Still, the memory of the Holocaust in Jewish minds remains very potent, in particular because of Ahmadinejad's pronouncements. This makes it difficult to ignore him and to hope that the "cold war" with Iran, similar to what existed between the superpowers, would also end, not in a full-scale collision, but in the relatively peaceful collapse of the side ruled by a dictatorial regime.

The various differences between Israel and Iran might not be greater than those that existed between the United States and the Soviet Union, but leaders such as Ahmadinejad, who have an intransigent religious faith, could be willing to bear the cost of a terrifying sacrifice in return for annihilating Israel.

In the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel demonstrated its readiness to launch a preventive war, as in 1956, and a preemptive strike, as in 1967. When Israel refrained from making the first move, as in 1973, the state experienced one of its darkest hours. The Iranians would certainly take that into consideration, in particular in a nuclear age when the stakes are much higher. Such a fear could, therefore, lead Iran to hit first with its nuclear weapon, if only to avoid a catastrophe. For such reasons, Israel might try to attack Iran before it became a full-fledged nuclear power.

Iran has dispersed and fortified its nuclear sites and has also surrounded them with anti-aircraft batteries,⁶ so eliminating, or even damaging, those sites would require an enormous effort by the IDF.

Theoretically, instead of risking its soldiers and airmen by sending them to Iran, Israel could launch dozens of long-range surface-to-surface missiles against the nuclear sites. But this would probably not be an option, at least not one Israel could completely depend upon without using its other forces. Israel's special forces could land from the air to gather information on the nuclear sites and perhaps participate in the assault itself, but even in this case, the main burden would fall on the air force. Some of the IAF planes would take care of the anti-aircraft batteries and intercept Iranian fighters, which would be scrambled against the attackers, while other Israeli aircraft would be dispatched to destroy the nuclear facilities. In order to accomplish all those assignments the IAF would have to concentrate its forces, but it is still doubtful if one large sortie would be sufficient.

Under those circumstances Israel should be ready not for a quick and swift strike, as the raid on the Iraqi nuclear reactor was in 1981, but for a longer military campaign that might last for weeks.

The Rear as a Target

Any Israeli attack on Iran would probably precipitate furious Iranian retaliation. This could include a direct and immediate launching of long-range, surface-to-surface missiles. Those missiles might be accurate enough to hit military objectives, and in particular Israeli airfields. That, of course, might reduce the number of sorties that Israel could mount against Iran. If the missiles are only able to reach targets such as Israeli cities, the Iranians would direct them to the cities, which are also Israel's weak link. Furthermore, an Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear sites, which are clearly a part of their military infrastructure needed to build the bomb, even those without many civilians near them, might nevertheless bring Iran to focus on Israeli civilian targets. Still, after such a response, which Israel might deem unavoidable, Israel would have to restrain itself, if only in order to end this collision with Iran as fast as possible.

At the time of this writing, Israel does not seem able to protect its entire population from the threat of a chemical attack.⁷ The death of many Israelis from an unconventional warhead carried by an Iranian missile, or from the continuous firing of conventional missiles from Iran, would turn a temporary exchange of punches into an extended showdown. As was the case with Hizbullah in the Second Lebanon War, the IDF would try to halt the firing aimed at the Israeli population. This time, the Israeli planes would have to travel a much greater distance on their way to the theatre of battle, although Iran would be more exposed because of its vast cities and industry.

The IAF gained experience in strategic attacks on diverse targets in the War of Attrition in the late 1960s. Then the goal was to coerce Egypt to stop firing on Israeli troops deployed on the front line near the Suez Canal.⁸ In a war against Iran, the Israeli aim would be focused on securing its home front, which would actually become the front line. Similarly to Syria in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the IAF could attack some of Iran's major weak points, the refineries and other facilities of the oil industry. However, an Israeli military campaign against the Iranian oil infrastructure in an attempt to force Iran to stop firing on Israel's rear and also to give up, or at least freeze, its nuclear project could possibly create a major global oil crisis for which Israel would be blamed, rendering such a move very problematic.

Iran, during her exhausting struggle with Iraq in the 1980s, proved her ability to absorb heavy casualties and damage for years, while Israel might find the continuity of the war too heavy a burden. Therefore, as in the Arab-Israeli wars, the Israeli strategy would be to aim for a fast victory. Israel, however, never having managed to subdue any of the Arab states, not even after the impressive achievement in 1967, would not be able to achieve that against a state as huge and remote as Iran.

A Regime Change?

In the 1956 war with Egypt, Israel hoped for the downfall of its president, Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir, but he remained in power.⁹ This was one of the occasions in which Israel wished to create a regime change in the Middle East as a result of military action. Israel might also try to do the same in Iran. While Arab leaders Anwar Sadat of Egypt and King Hussein of Jordan waged war against Israel and later made peace with the Jewish state, it is unlikely that the current Iranian regime would repeat this pattern. Although Iran and Israel did not directly meet on the battlefield, the ongoing tension between them, this "cold war," and in particular the nuclear issue, might drive them to a shooting war. The two sides have no territorial disputes, but the rulers of Iran are firm in their belief that Israel must

be deleted from the map. They may accept the idea of a Jewish state but not in the Middle East. Iran's leadership also opposes a compromise between Israel and the Palestinians, which emphasizes Iran's aspiration to gain influence by encouraging the continuance of violence at the expense of the Palestinians, about whom Iranians are supposedly concerned.

For those reasons, Israel might focus not necessarily on the Iranian nuclear infrastructure but on the regime itself. Obviously, Israel should strive to accomplish both aims, but it may have to choose between them, if only due to the critical need for military surprise and concentration of force against either goal: the nuclear sites or the regime.

None of those tasks would be easy to implement and the implications for Israel, solely from the Iranian perspective, might be severe. Still, for many Iranians the nuclear project is a national asset, while their regime is not. Israel could probably tolerate an Iran with nuclear projects, even a bomb, since this process started in the days the two states enjoyed friendly relations. As with Pakistan, Israel could bear a large Muslim non-Arab state with a nuclear arsenal, as long as it does not seek to obliterate the Jewish state. Of course intentions may change, sometimes even overnight, especially if the regime is replaced by a dangerous opposition, but Israel could live with such a risk.

From time to time, there are signs of internal unrest in Iran. Economic difficulties, among other reasons, could cause political instability. Although this might not completely undermine the regime, it might force it to focus on strengthening the economy, even at the expense of its nuclear program. After all, of paramount interest to the Iranian government is its own survival, and placing the economy at the top of its list of priorities would ensure that. Such a development could cause a delay in the nuclear project. Gaining time is not the best outcome for Israel, but is still a reasonable compromise—at least until a better option presents itself. However, Israel can only hope for a global action on this issue, and should therefore seek as many allies as possible.

In the 1970s, the United States nurtured Iran and Israel as two of its strongest allies in the Middle East, one in the Persian Gulf and the other in the eastern Mediterranean. This was part of the American struggle against the Soviet Union and its allies in the Middle East.

From the early 1980s, the US developed its ties with Egypt instead of Iran because of the Islamic revolution.¹⁰ Over the years, the US also pushed for a regime change in Iran.¹¹ Iran, therefore, disconnected itself from the US, while continuing to pursue a position of hegemony in the Gulf and also, particularly since the '90s,

to increase its involvement in the eastern Mediterranean. Those were both key regions for the United States, which put Washington and Tehran on a collision course. Thus, Israel and the United States have common goals: pushing Iran out the eastern Mediterranean, neutralizing its nuclear project and bringing down the current regime. Those goals are shared by other states, including Arab ones, irrespective of their antipathy toward Israel.

The Arab States' Perspective

In the 1980s, Saddam Hussein's ambitions to make Iraq a dominant power in the Middle East made him not much different than present-day Iran. Iraq was an Arab country, but it still presented a threat to its Arab neighbors, particularly those in the Persian Gulf. However, in 1980 Saddam did not send his army south against other Arab states, as he did a decade later, but east, against their common rival, Iran; yet, that was not necessarily what the other Arab states wanted. They could have suspected that an Iraqi victory over Iran would be exploited to establish Iraq's position in the Middle East at the expense of other Arab states, including those that supported Iraq in the war against Iran. At the same time, those Arab states would not be totally secure from Iran.

Still, at least for Iraq, it seemed a genuine opportunity, since the Iranian army was badly shaken due to the purging brought about by the Islamic revolution and the rupture of its supply lines to the United States, from which many of its weapons systems came. After early successes, however, the Iraqi army was stopped and then pushed back over its borders. Iraq, and in particular Saddam, who fought to survive, described the war with Iran as a battle to protect the Arab world—one in which Iraq was the front line confronting the intimidating threat from the east. This portrayal was similar to the way in which Nazi Germany presented itself during World War II as the last bulwark, preventing Europe from being overtaken by Soviet Russia. In fact, the immediate goal of Iran in the 1980s and the Soviet Union in the 1940s was to bring down their opponents' regime. That is why Saddam and Hitler before him wished to gather support from other nations, which, though suspicious, feared the worse of two evils (in this case Iran or the Soviets) much more.

Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia were reluctant to participate in the Iran-Iraq war and actually send in their armies, and settled for a minor contribution by assisting Iraq to bolster its war effort, thus preventing an Iraqi collapse. It was still quite a gamble because of the risk of an Iranian retaliation.

While in the mid-1990s Iraq was Iran's main rival,¹² these days Iraq's future is unclear. It might be divided, even unofficially, which would allow Iran, through

the Shia in the south of Iraq, direct access to the rest of the Arab world. This could be the start of an Iranian maneuver to encircle the Gulf. That action would be aimed at realizing dreams of a truly “Persian Gulf”—in other words, one that would be under the influence, if not the direct control, of the new Persian Empire, in much the same way as Rome saw the Mediterranean Sea as a Roman lake.

A breach in what could be called the Iraqi wall would therefore be a cause for concern among the Arabs, particularly if Iran possesses a nuclear arsenal. Although Iran does not need such a corridor inside Iraq in order to use such a weapon, the combination of the two would increase its might. The palpable dread arising from such a development could push Arab states to seek the protection of a foreign power.

The Arab states, in particular those in the Gulf, are concerned with Iran’s growing influence, but they are also worried about the implications of an attack on Iran by Western powers.¹³ Still, none of the Western powers may be willing to do whatever it takes in order to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. Such a project requires a long-term commitment. Even a massive military offensive of Western powers, in particular the United States, obliterating the Iranian nuclear infrastructure might not put an end to this issue. As long as the Iranian regime is not replaced, it could continue to aspire to obtain nuclear weapons, perhaps with more determination. Attacks against Iran could convince the country’s leadership that their enemies’ ultimate goal is to oust their regime, as they did with Saddam, and having nuclear weapons would be the only means of deterring their foes from adopting this policy. Iran would then seek to obtain nuclear weapons as soon as possible, by focusing all efforts on obtaining the bomb itself. Besides the obvious option of building the nuclear weapons themselves, which would contradict Iran’s declaration that the project is solely for peaceful purposes, other means are possible. Iran might approach its neighbor Pakistan in order to buy those weapons. Another possibility would be facilitating a regime change in Pakistan, assuming a new government would then agree to sell at least one of its bombs to Iran. This option seems more plausible, given the lack of political stability in Pakistan. Be that as it may, the other states in the Middle East may have to be ready in advance for a prolonged struggle with Iran.

From the 1950s to the ‘70s, Israel considered Iran not only a source of oil,¹⁴ but also a potential ally against the Arabs. Now it is the other way around. Israel’s former wish to outflank the Arabs by reaching out to remote states such as Iran has now switched to Israeli attempts to join the Arabs against this external threat to the region in which both Israel and the Arabs live. Israel, because of its military strength, could, ironically, be the Arabs’ most powerful ally in the region against Iran, especially after the loss of Iraq.

On the other hand, Arabs have several reasons not to cooperate with the Jewish state. Israel could not replace Iraq as a counter to an ascendant Iran. Israel does not face Iran, as Iraq did. Israel is also used to fighting a coalition based on Arab states, not joining it. To be sure, the relatively new Iranian-Israeli conflict will not replace the old Arab-Israeli conflict. However, this does not preclude the possibility of Arab states and Israel rising together against the threatening challenge posed by Iran. It would probably be an unofficial, temporary and ad hoc alliance or perhaps even just a general strategic understanding. For several Arab states, Israel would act as a powerful non-Arab state in the Middle East, sharing common interests with them, just as Iran does for Syria.

Because of the Iranian intervention in Iraq, Israel would be particularly sensitive to the situation in Jordan. An Iranian presence in the kingdom that has the longest border with Israel would be a new and disturbing development for Israel. In fact, even without the encouragement of the United States, Israel would also seek to prevent Iran from seizing Arab states that do not have a border with Israel, including those that are relatively distant, in the Persian Gulf. If not stopped, Iran could obtain not only the vast natural resources of those states, but also create a momentum in which other Arab states might consider joining it. This would represent a drastic change in the strategic balance between Iran and Israel, which is already in favor of Iran. It is reasonable for Iran to assume that Israel would not tolerate this, just as Iran would not tolerate an Israeli attack on Syria. However, contrary to the potential role of Iran in a war between Israel and Syria, Israel would not send IDF troops to hold back an Iranian invasion, nor would the Arabs ask for that. Israel could convey to Iran the message that there would be a strong response against Iran or its allies, albeit indirectly and not immediately. In considering all of Israel's capabilities, including its nuclear card, Iran might be induced to rethink any dangerous adventure, such as trying to occupy an Arab state.

The most important factor in an Israeli-Arab strategic axis against Iran, at least in the near future, is the need to stop the Iranian nuclear project. Arab states might tolerate an IAF penetration into their territory, on their way to attack targets in Iran, especially since Israel would launch planes that require only a few hours to cross Arab lands. Such an operation would also be mounted without any open cooperation with the local Arab armies.

The Arabs would probably agree to turn a blind eye after the failure of all other international efforts, such as economic sanctions. Arab governments would probably come under criticism for this, but even then it would be preferable to them, if only to delay a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. Once Iran obtains the bomb, many Arab countries might seek this weapon in order to shield themselves from Tehran.

Iran could claim that the IAF not only crossed Iraqi airspace, but also coordinated its attack with the American forces deployed there. Therefore, the United States would probably prefer that the IAF not pass through areas that are under its control in Iraq, if only to avoid an Iranian retaliation against the United States, particularly against her troops in Iraq. This would be a setback for Israel, because the presence of US forces in Iraq could have been used for emergency cases such as landing, in contrast to the conditions in other Arab countries.

Iran's Allies: Syria and Hizbullah

In 2007 the IDF observed that Hamas in the Gaza Strip had improved its capabilities as a result of using experts in guerilla warfare trained in Iran,¹⁵ though it is not clear that Iran is responsible for arming and training Hamas.¹⁶ This was one example of Iran's support of organizations such as Hizbullah and Hamas that cost Israeli lives and caused various forms of damage.

Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan criticized Hizbullah for triggering the Second Lebanon War, in 2006.¹⁷ Indeed, the existence of Hizbullah and Hamas has been disturbing Arab states as well, since those organizations created a model for other radical Muslim movements that jeopardized existing Arab regimes. An Israeli attack on Hizbullah or Hamas that would not require any involvement in, or crossing, of Arab territory could be welcomed by those countries, even if officially they had to call for ceasefire and condemn Israel.

The relationship between Syria and the Islamic regime of Iran started in the early 1970s.¹⁸ Today, at least from a military point of view, Syria is not only Iran's most powerful ally in the Middle East, but also one that has borders with Israel, while Hizbullah was pushed back into Lebanon a few kilometers away from the Israeli border after the Second Lebanon War. Accordingly, Iran has invested in rearming the Syrian military in recent years with anti-tank missiles and other armaments.

Since the late 1960s, Syria has sought to regain the Golan Heights, overrun by Israel in 1967. This factor does not concern Iran directly, but is used to attract Syria to the Iranian camp, a very important move in case of a collision with Israel. In such a situation, the IDF would have to fight on two fronts, and this would also demonstrate that a showdown between Iran and Israel is actually a war between Israel and the Arabs.

Israel could negotiate with Syria, if only to reach an understanding that neither would go to war solely because of Iran. Syria does have a grim memory of former alliances against Israel with other states in the Middle East, which failed at the moment of truth, and this could trump the option of receiving assistance from Iran

in its effort to retake the Golan. Furthermore, the Syrian regime might crumble under IDF pressure, especially if Israel assumes that a new government, based on the Sunni majority in Syria, however hostile to Israel, might not be so friendly to the Shia of Iran and those of Hizbullah. Such a move could also be tolerated by Arab states with a Sunni majority, such as Egypt.

Similarly, the threat from Iran and the Iraqi Shia could push the Iraqi Sunnis and also Iraqi Kurds to sign an anti-Iranian agreement backed by Arab states and the US. Israel could also offer to help, as it did with the Iraqi Kurds in the 1960s against Saddam's regime. The Sunnis and the Kurds of Iraq, despite their own disputes, would be a forward base of the anti-Iran coalition, in much the same way that Hizbullah and Hamas represent Iranian outposts in the eastern Mediterranean. After all, the Sunnis and Kurds of Iraq, like Hizbullah in Lebanon, are based in states in which government authority is crumbling. This affords those forces relative freedom of action.

Conclusion

The most contentious issue of the Iranian-Israeli conflict is Iran's nuclear project. The Israeli fear of an Iranian version of a "final solution" might push Israel to launch a preemptive strike against Iran. However, just one blow might not be enough, considering the various measures Iran implemented in order to protect her nuclear infrastructure. Israel should therefore be ready for a long struggle, in which the rear of both sides would be hit.

Israel could be part of a vast anti-Iranian coalition, including Arab states that are also on alert, fearing Iran's ambitions, particularly after losing Iraq as their shield. This option remains open should the Western powers not do what the Arabs expect them to do about Iran.

From the Arab perspective, Israel could deter Iran from expanding, carrying the burden in an attack on the Iranian nuclear infrastructure and dealing with Iran's allies—Syria, Hizbullah and Hamas. Still, the Arabs, if only for internal reasons, would try to limit and hide any cooperation with Israel. This mutual understanding between some Arab states and Israel would, in any case, be temporary marriages of convenience. An Arab-Israeli axis would probably not be a great Semitic alliance against the Persians, but it could be a possible solution to what looms as one of their greatest challenges in the near future—the Iranian threat.

Notes

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- ² Richard A. Preston and Sydney F. Wise, *Men in Arms* (New York, 1974), pp. 30-31.
- ³ Seymour M. Hersh, *The Samson Option* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1992) p. 22; Avner Yaniv, *Politics and Strategy in Israel* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1994), p. 150; Louis René Beres, "Israel's Uncertain Strategic Future," *Parameters* (Spring 2007), 37-54.
- ⁴ Ephraim Kam, *From Terror to Nuclear Bombs: The Significance of the Iranian Threat* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 2004), pp. 415-418.
- ⁵ Avner Cohen, *The Last Taboo* [Hebrew] (Or Yehuda, 2005), p. 262.
- ⁶ Ronen Bergman, *Point of No Return* [Hebrew] (Or Yehuda, 2007), p. 498.
- ⁷ *Maariv*, August 26, 2007.
- ⁸ David Rodman, "Regime-Targeting: A Strategy for Israel," *Between War and Peace: Dilemmas of Israeli Security*, Efraim Karsh (ed.) (London, 1996), pp. 55-156.
- ⁹ Motti Golani, *There Will Be War Next Summer* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1997), Volume 2, pp. 617-618; El-Sayed Amin Shalaby, "Egypt's Foreign Policy 1952-1992," *Security Dialogue*, XXIII:3 (1992), 108.
- ¹⁰ Everett Mendelsohn, *A Compassionate Peace* (New York, 1989), p. 225.
- ¹¹ Houman A. Sadri, "Surrounded: Seeing the World from Iran's Point of View," *Military Review* (July/August, 2007), p. 13.
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- ¹³ Shibley Telhami, "America in Arab Eyes," *Survival* (Spring, 2007), 117.
- ¹⁴ Uri Bialer, *Oil and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1948-65* (London, 1999), p. 240.
- ¹⁵ *Haaretz*, October 30, 2007.
- ¹⁶ Jeff Black and Mel Frykberg, "Egypt Plays Arbitrator," *Middle East*, August/ September 2007, 16.
- ¹⁷ *Financial Times*, December 13, 2006.
- ¹⁸ Eyal Zisser, *Faces of Syria* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 2003), p. 274.