

# Balancing deterrence: Iran-Israel relations in a turbulent Middle East

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to examine the regional dynamics that further consolidated Israel's national security in the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, reflecting upon the nuclear challenge between Iran and Israel and Iran's expanding activities in the region.

**Design/methodology/approach** – To prove the central argument, the study uses a conceptual framework that centers on deterrence as the main approach used by states to consolidate their influence in the Middle East region.

**Findings** – Iran's nuclear progress and influence in the region has strengthened Israel's security and fostered an unprecedented open rapprochement led by USA efforts with the Gulf regimes.

**Originality/value** – The paper draws particular attention to the Iran–Israel nuclear competency, and the Israeli preferred policy options regarding Iranian activities in the region amid turbulent Middle East. In addition, the paper offers insight to the regional dynamics that further consolidated Israel's national security in the region while maintaining a status of Arab vulnerability and backwardness.

**Keywords** Iran, Israel, Deterrence, Iran-Israel relations, Nuclear competency, Regional security

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

The wave of mass protests that spread across the Arab countries consecutively in 2011 have rapidly developed into full scale revolutionary upheavals that toppled regimes, overthrew rulers and resulted in substantial change in the Middle East region.

Amid this turbulent environment, Israel stood skeptic to the wind of change from the onset of the revolutionary phase, nevertheless, wary of the impact these consecutive waves might have on Israel national security. The Middle East post the Arab Spring has undergone several profound changes; rapid developments and prolonged instability in the region has brought about the actions of outside actors, which subsequently had severe repercussions on regional security.

Iran's growing activism in the Middle East, in the aftermath of the Arab revolutionary waves (the Arab Spring), has sent shock waves in the Gulf region. However, concerns about Iran are not confined only to its declared entrenchment strategy, more importantly; it is



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centered on its mounting nuclear activities. Israel is concerned about the presence of a nuclear force in the region that is capable of developing and eventually possessing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles that would jeopardize Israel national security and threaten the state of Israel. The only viable force in the region, that has demonstrated prowess of developing further its nuclear power depending on national capabilities and possessing the required technology, is Iran.

The paper examines the development of the Iranian-Israeli relations in a turbulent Middle East, focusing on nuclear weapons as a means of deterrence, and considering Iran's entrenchment through proxies in the region and its implications on Israel security amid a status of Arab vulnerability. The main argument is that while Israel's security entails deterring Iran from possessing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, nevertheless Israel's security is further consolidated and preserved through Iran's prevailing influence in the Middle East region post the Arab Spring as it maintains a status of Arab vulnerability and backwardness, which, in turn, serves Israel's national security.

To understand the oscillating relationship between the two rivals, the paper first begins with an examination of the Iranian-Israeli relations before the Iranian revolution, and tackles the development of Israel – Iran relationship in the post-Iranian revolutionary phase. The paper then provides a conceptual approach to understanding deterrence and balance of power. Then, the paper delineates the Iranian-Israeli nuclear competency, highlighting Israeli concerns regarding Iranian nuclear capabilities. The paper then examines Israel preferred policy option to curb Iran's nuclear power, highlighting the Israeli approach after the rise of Donald Trump to power and the significant developments after repealing the nuclear deal. The paper ends with an examination of the repercussions of Iran's prevailing influence in the Middle East region post the Arab Spring and tackles the regional dynamics that further consolidated Israel's national security.

### **Iranian-Israeli relations: a history of synergy and enmity**

Iran was one of the first Muslim countries to recognize the State of Israel after its inception in 1948. Officially, Iran voted against the UN Partition Plan for Palestine in 1947, and after the establishment of Israel, opposed its acceptance as a member state into the organization. Nonetheless, two years after the declaration of Ben-Gurion on the 14th of May 1948, the Iranian government recognized the state of Israel *de facto* making it the second Muslim-majority country after Turkey to recognize Israel (Green, 2018).

For the newly born Jewish state, it was crucial to elicit as much recognition and support from the regional and international spheres. Thus, from its beginnings Israeli foreign policy unceasingly, attempted to break the wall of political isolation in the region by eliciting recognition from regional actors. Such activities bore Turkish recognition of Israel and the establishment of diplomatic relations at the end of 1949, and *de facto* Iranian recognition of Israel at the start of 1950 (Bialer, 1985, p. 293).

The relations between the two countries, however, soon became strained after Iranian premier Mohamed Mossadegh accused Israel of being dependent on the Americans and Britons who allowed the military coup against the Mossadegh government in 1953. In those years, the authority of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who maintained good relations with Israel, has been boosted.

The shah regime in Iran maintained a pro-Western foreign policy and ties with Israel, preferring, however, to keep them confidential in a premeditated strategy that offered an original interpretation of the term "world real politik" (Rezaei and Cohen, 2014, p. 443).

In the 1950s and 1960s, Iran saw itself threatened by the spread of Soviet-sponsored pan-Arab nationalism, whose mascot was president Gamal Abdel Nasser (Green, 2018). The two

countries maintained a mutual strategic relationship; on the one hand, Israel had interest in establishing relations with Iran and non-Arab countries, as part of a grand strategy to leapfrog its Arab foes. On the other hand, Iran shared common interest with Israel in resisting the spread of pan-Arabism and harbored resentments against Arab states owing to Arab nationalist aspirations, which were epitomized by the Arab struggle to alter the name of the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Gulf (Rezaei and Cohen, 2014, p. 443). The Shah, thus, perceived relations with Israel as irreplaceable, and as something that would induce the US support.

This close connection has been altered after the birth of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran at the hands of Ayatollah Khomeini, through which Iran's foreign policy has been reformulated. In other words, regime change in Iran has created a new rivalry in the Middle East region, following the downfall of the Shah of Iran, which induced a new phase of Iranian – Israeli relations.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Iranian revolution 1979 marked the onset of a dramatic phase in the relationship between politics and Islam as it overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty, rejected monarchy as un-Islamic, and established an Islamic Republic continuing to this day (Carl Brown, 2000, p. 161).

The Iranian Islamic revolution emphasized the notion; Islamic state in the Middle East region by politicizing the Arabs and mobilizing them as vanguards of Islam (Burns, 2005, p. 4). The most widespread and commonly held slogan that united the various revolutionary parties and their supporters regardless of party and program was "to let the Shah go and there be flood afterwards" (Katouzian, 2009, p. 21).

The principles of Khomeini's revolution has been based on, exporting the Islamic revolution against "apostates" in the region and forcing a clash of civilizations with the "infidel" West, hegemonic control of the Islamic and Arab world, particularly in the oil-rich Persian Gulf, and a commitment to destroy Israel, "the Little Satan," as a symbol of the USA, "the Great Satan" (Shapira and Diker, 2007, pp. 33-34).

Although both countries do not share common borders and have no territorial disputes, however, they share common threat perceptions; being surrounded by an Arab and Sunni environment (Green, 2018). In fact, to evaluate the changes the revolution has brought about in Israeli-Iranian relations; it is of crucial importance to consider the geo-strategic imperatives for both countries, being surrounded by Arab Sunni Muslim states.

Therefore, even after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, strategic interests of the two countries also intersected during the 1980s. Two examples could be highlighted; first, the Iran-Iraq War; in which Iran became embroiled in open conflict with Iraq. For Israel, the opportunity to arm Islamic Iran against Iraq was irresistible. Between 1981 and 1983, it sold an estimated \$500m worth of arms to Iran, most of them paid for in oil (Green, 2018). Second, the "Iran-Contra" deal of the mid-1980s was another example, by which Israel was to sell its own out-of-date American weapons to Iran and transfer the money it received, minus a commission, to the contras revolutionaries battling the socialist regime in Nicaragua – despite a congressional ban on USA aid to the contras (Green, 2018).

Out of these dealings that supported Iran in this new phase, Israel aimed at improving its relationship with Iran, on the grounds that Iraq was a serious military power and a greater threat, while hoping that the new regime in Iran would reconsider its relationship with Israel and recognize the benefit of mutual interest.

As long as the Cold War resumed, Iran, as a major source of oil and with its control of access to the Persian Gulf, was an important USA ally. In this regard, it found common cause with Israel (Green, 2018). However, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the defeat of

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Saddam Hussein in 1991 eliminated the two common threats that had enabled strong common strategic interests to exist for more than three decades (Barsi, 2005, p. 247).

Starting the 1990s the threat perception among the Iranian regime became more focused on the USA as the “Great Satan” and Israel as the “Little Satan” (Green, 2018), and the earlier strategic relationship was in tatters.

The developments in the Arab-Israeli conflict that started with the Oslo peace journey and the *rapprochement* between Israel and the Arab states has also impacted the relationship between Israel and Iran. For Iran, the Iranian regime has long perceived the Palestinian question as a matter that primarily concerns the Palestinians and the Arab countries, thus, the Islamic regime in Iran has never activated its rhetoric about Israel into hostile operations, to avoid direct involvement and confrontation with Israel.

For Israel, however, at the time of Oslo, and because of a number of developments on the regional and international spheres, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin concluded that a peace formula with the Arab states would better serve Israel’s long term security against growing Islamic fundamentalism in Iran. Oftentimes, Israel’s response is explained by the notion of a balance of threats; that is with Iraq defeated, and the Arab countries pursuing diplomacy, Iran seems as the only country left in the region with an offensive capability that can threaten Israel (Barsi, 2005, p. 249). Therefore, owing to these developments, the view of Iran with its growing offensive capability as an irrevocable threat has been the common rhetoric of all the Israeli governments that followed Rabin in office.

### **Theoretical framework to deterrence and balance of power: a conceptual approach**

In an attempt to examine the balancing of deterrence in the Iran-Israel dynamics, this section focuses on the main literature review on deterrence and balance of power theories as a supporting framework, which could be comparatively applied to both Israel and Iran.

Deterrence theory delineates a set of academic work that prevailed in western literature in the era following the end of World War II. Following the war, the rivalry between the USA and the Soviet Union dominated the international scene. The global contest between the superpowers was both dramatic and dangerous, the stakes were high; control of the international system lay in the balance (Zagare, 1996, p. 365).

However, the origins of classical deterrence theory are traced to the realist political thought and balance of power politics (Zagare, 1996, p. 365). In the era following the war, the realist theory paradigm of war prevention had been refined in light of the new emerging realities in the postwar international system to modern deterrence theory. Therefore, modern deterrence theory would be regarded as a recalibration of classical balance of power theory.

In thinking about balancing deterrence, the conceptual borders between deterrence and balance of power shall be examined. Deterrence engages motivations, decision-making and intentions (Wilner, 2015, p. 451). Deterrence is an enduring important recourse in international politics. However, its application must be adjusted to major shifts in the global and regional international systems, not just via individual responses of actors to their specific security threats. In the past, as postulated by Morgan (2012, pp. 85-86), deterrence was a standard practice such as diplomacy or spying or war, readily used within an overall security strategy. Moreover, classic balance of power systems were based on deterrence, applied by actors not just to prevent wars but via wars. However, Morgan (2012, p. 86) argues that this conception of deterrence has started to change in the first half of the twentieth century, as efforts accelerated to better comprehend how it works, how it could best be applied and, the kinds of capabilities necessary for maximizing its effectiveness. As

such, a rising interest in deterrence as a strategy became critical for preventing wars that could be unusually violent and destructive. The rise of the cold war has even fostered the concept; with nuclear deterrence as the heart of the major nations' national security strategies, charged with preserving their existence, the need to have it works – at the highest level of warfare, and often at lower levels or with serious conflicts short of war to prevent escalation to the highest level – became overwhelming (Morgan, 2012, p. 86).

Other works challenged classical deterrence literature and demonstrated some significant theoretical contributions of previous waves of deterrence theory to the study of deterrence and to security studies in general (Lupovici, 2010, pp. 706-707).

In this respect, three main waves of deterrence theory could be identified, the first wave was developed after World War II, where deterrence ideas had relatively little impact on policy, the second wave emerged in the late 1950s and incorporated game theory models, thus enabling a better understanding of actors' tactics, whereas the third wave of deterrence theory grappled with the difficulties of the second such as its lack of supporting evidence and its heavy reliance on deduction (Lupovici, 2010, pp. 706-707).

Lupovici (2010, p. 706) suggests that the main contribution of the interpretative approach to deterrence is the acknowledgment of the social context through which deterrence ideas are better adopted and understood and through which actors' behavior is being shaped. According to Lupovici (2010, p. 710), the emergence of new threats such as rogue states and terrorists, and the development of interpretative approaches, has fostered a fourth wave of deterrence by the end of the Cold War, which is nuclear deterrence, through which constructivists and other interpretative scholars started focusing mainly on nuclear deterrence between the superpowers.

As Zagare (1985, p. 156) notes, for deterrence to work, the player making the threat must have the capability of carrying out the threat, the threat must be credible and the threat must be stable, that is, it must not prompt the undesirable behavior. Therefore, the logic of mutual deterrence is an attempt by party A to prevent party B from undertaking a course of action, which A regards as undesirable, by threatening to inflict unacceptable costs upon B in the event that the action is taken. Moreover, Zagare (1985, p. 156) asserts that in this deterrence relationship, the requirements of capability, credibility and stability imply a relationship among the possible outcomes of a mutual deterrence game identical in structure to that of Prisoners' Dilemma, where two rational parties owing to their own self-interests, choose not to cooperate to produce the optimal outcome.

As highlighted earlier, in thinking about balancing deterrence, there is a conceptual border between deterrence and balance of power. Balance of Power is an ancient field of study in international relations. Traditionally, as Kang (2007, pp. 9-10) suggests, the standard and most widely accepted measures of balancing are investments by states to turn latent power such as economic, technological, social and natural resources into military capabilities. Thus, Kang (2007, p. 10) highlights that the means of balancing can vary between internal and external elements; internal elements comprise military preparations and arms buildups directed at an obvious threat, whereas external elements entail forging countervailing military alliances with other states against the threat.

In this respect, Mearsheimer (2013, p. 79) introduced a structural realist explanation as to why states compete for power. The explanation is based on five assumptions about the international system when collectively combined; they depict a world of ceaseless security competition. Amongst the main assumptions proposed by Mearsheimer is that all states possess some offensive military capability and that states can never be certain about the intentions of other states, moreover, states are rational actors capable of coming up with sound strategies that maximize their prospects for survival.

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Healy and Stein (1973, p. 33) noted earlier that the international system has evolved into a multipolar world. They tested the propositions about the notion balance of power of seven authors; A. L. Burns, M. Kaplan, D. Singer and M. Small, F. H. Hinsley, R. Rosecrance and F. Harary that concern one of four major approaches to the multipolar system. However, still the notion balance of power has been criticized for ambiguity and ambivalence by scholars, and a vigorous scholarly debate has emerged over how to measure balancing. As hard-balancing has not occurred against the USA in the post-Cold War era, this resulted in introducing relatively new concepts such as soft-balancing (Kang, 2007, p. 10).

Pape (2005, p. 17) argues that the notion soft balancing, which encompass the use of international institutions, economic statecraft, and diplomatic arrangements has been used to delay, frustrate and undermine aggressive unilateral USA military policies, and that the power of a unipolar leader may keep other states from forming a balancing coalition, but it is still a key reason why these states may turn to soft-balancing measures to achieve this aim.

Pape (2005, p. 16), however, argues that the dynamics of balancing in unipolar and multipolar systems are different; he explains that balancing against a unipolar leader cannot be done by any one state alone; it can only be done by several second-ranked states acting collectively. While in a multipolar system, strong states rarely welcome others standing in their way and can impose harsh penalties on those that do. In a multipolar system, major powers have a reasonable chance of defending themselves individually against even the strongest state in the system.

In conclusion, this paper adopts the notion of hard balancing; that is military balancing in comparing deterrence and balancing capabilities of both Israel and Iran. For this purpose, the paper shall examine Pape's hypothesis about balancing in multipolar system, which states that major powers have the opportunity of defending themselves individually against even the strongest state in the system.

### **Balancing deterrence: the Iranian-Israeli nuclear competency**

For the purpose of examining the dynamics of Iran-Israel-relations, the following section highlights the notion of hard balancing in comparing deterrence capabilities of both Israel and Iran, and provides an analytical explanation to the balancing deterrence in Iran-Israel-relations, building on the conceptual framework explored in the previous section.

Israel and Iran began an early quest for acquiring nuclear weapons. Both countries' quest for nuclear technology has started early in the 1950s with Israel initiating its nuclear program by secretly establishing a nuclear reactor with French assistance (Cohen, 1998, p. 54), and Iran began its nuclear program in the 1950s with technical assistance from the USA. While Iran signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), Israel remains a non-signatory to the NPT insisting it will not be the first country to acknowledge its possession of nuclear weapons in the Middle East.

Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) entered into an agreement for the application of safeguards in connection with the treaty on the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons, which entered into force on May 15, 1974 (Salabli, 2013, p. 5). With Iran's quest for advancing nuclear technology for military purposes, which would be able to deter Israel's nuclear capacity, Tel Aviv's concerns and fears were further strengthened. The Israeli enmity toward Iran has intensified during the reign of Iranian President Ahmadinejad because of the increasing Iranian nuclear capabilities, accompanied by the open inflammatory anti-Israel rhetoric statements of the Iranian regime.

During the reign of President Ahmadinejad, after USA occupation of Iraq in 2003, Iran's foreign policy has centered on advancing Iran's nuclear capabilities. The Iranian "nuclear – centered strategy", in addition to supporting non state actors in the Mideast such as

Hezbollah in Lebanon and Islamic Jihad in the occupied Palestinian territories of the West Bank, remained the main pivot of Iran's strategy until the outbreak of the Arab revolutionary waves in the Middle East in 2011, all of which added to the Israeli fears and enmity toward Iran.

As noted by Zagare, for deterrence to work, the capability of carrying out the threat by one party to inflict unacceptable costs upon another party and the credibility of the threat and its stability are prerequisites for mutual deterrence. This could be explained in the Iran-Israel rivalry over nuclear armament. On one side, Israel grew more skeptical of Iran's nuclear program, depicting it as a lethal threat to Israel, after the IAEA's most comprehensive report in November 2011, which expressed its "serious concerns regarding possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear program" (Salabili, 2013, p. 5). On the other side, Iran continued to protect its nuclear sites and harden its nuclear capabilities fearing that Israel could strike first as tensions between both parties flared (The Guardian, 2010).

Nevertheless, Iran's foreign policy post the Arab spring has reflected continuity more than change. The regime under president Hassan Rouhani maintained activities related to developing nuclear arms, mostly until Iran signed the P5 + 1 nuclear deal in 2015 with the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany, by which it agreed among other parameters, to reduce by two-thirds its installed centrifuges, and to not enrich uranium over 3.67 per cent for at least 15 years (The White House, 2015).

Considering Israel's inability to balance highly populace Iran, in addition to Iran's pursuit of advancing nuclear technology, both of which raised fears in Israel concerning Israel's security on the long term, deterring Iranian nuclear capabilities has become a priority, and the balance of power paradigm would no longer preserve Israel's security.

As Efraim Inbar points out, a nuclear Iran would have far reaching strategic and political implications for the Middle East region (Inbar, 2012, p. 43). The possession of nuclear weapons will only embolden other actors in the region, primarily Iranian proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, the Persian Gulf and the Palestinians. Inbar further explains that Iran's successful pursuit of nuclear weapons will lead to a multipolar Middle East by encouraging similar ambitions of Iran's rivals in the region to follow suit (Inbar, 2012, p. 43).

The Israeli stance can be explained further in light of Pape's explanation of balancing power in multipolar and unipolar systems. As highlighted earlier, in a multipolar system, strong states rarely welcome others standing in their way and have a reasonable chance of defending themselves individually against even the strongest state in the system. This might partially explain why Israel advanced its deterrence strategy, as it perceived Iran as a potential nuclear threat in a multipolar system that could threaten its regional security in the long run, therefore, it unwelcomed negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program and consistently opposed any diplomatic action by the P5 + 1 countries to address the issue.

Consequently, from the Israeli perspective, the most effective approach to prevent Iran from developing its nuclear capabilities is deterrence. For instance, one proposed method of countering the Iranian threat is to engage in a preventive war against Tehran's nuclear infrastructure (Graham, 2011, p. 53). This has been the prevailing approach of Israeli Likud government during the Obama administration. Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu has overtly expressed reservations about the efficacy of the dominant diplomatic strategy pursued by the P5 + 1 countries to address the Iranian nuclear challenge (Rajiv, 2016, pp. 47-48).

While the Obama administration preferred to pursue diplomacy to contain the Iranian nuclear challenge, Israel continued to be skeptical of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) of July 2015 to effectively address its core concerns *vis-à-vis* Iran (Rajiv, 2016, p. 48). Few days after the Iran nuclear deal was concluded in 2015, Netanyahu addressed the

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international community reiterating the old rhetoric on Iran's entrenchment in the region; in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, and raising doubts about the ability of the deal to block Iran's path to nuclear weapons:

Under this deal, If Iran doesn't change its behavior, In fact, if it becomes even more dangerous in the years to come, the most important constraints will still be automatically lifted by year 10 and by year 15. That would place a militant Islamic terror regime weeks away from having the fissile material for an entire arsenal of nuclear bombs. . . This deal will treat Iran like a normal country even if it remains a dark theocracy that conquers its neighbors, sponsors terrorism worldwide and chants death to Israel, death to America (Netanyahu, 2015).

After Iran fired ballistic missiles, the following year at the United Nations General Assembly, Netanyahu stressed again the greatest threat to Israel is the Iranian regime and that Israel will not allow Iran to develop its nuclear capabilities.

"The threat Iran poses to all of us is not behind us, it is before us. In the coming years, there must be a sustained and united effort to push back against Iran's aggression and Iran's terror. With the nuclear constraints on Iran one year closer to being removed, let me be clear: Israel will not allow the terrorist regime in Iran to develop nuclear weapons – not now, not in a decade and not ever" (Netanyahu, 2016).

Assuming that Iran has been building intercontinental ballistic missiles that can carry nuclear warheads, and has missiles that can reach Israel, as claimed by Netanyahu, the prospects of deterrence would still prevail. It is difficult to argue that Iran would prefer to initiate a nuclear strike against Israel for two main reasons.

First, Iran considers Israeli deterrent capabilities. Even though the Israeli government has never confirmed or denied its possession of nuclear weapons, it is widely accepted that Israel is a nuclear state and has been so for more than half a century. In a 2014 study for the bulletin of Atomic Scientists, the Israeli nuclear stockpile has been estimated at 80 warheads for delivery by aircraft, land based ballistic missiles, and sea-based cruise missiles and submarines (Kristensen and Norris, 2014, p. 97). Kristensen and Norris (2014, p. 103) estimate the land-based ballistic missiles at 25 warheads, presuming that if Israel has no more than 25 single-warhead land-based ballistic missiles, such a large stockpile would imply as many as 150 to 350 air-delivered bombs or a significant inventory of other types of nuclear weapons.

Nevertheless, a strategic assessment report on Israel's nuclear program presented to the Center for Strategic and International studies has estimated the Israeli nuclear arsenal at more than 200 boosted and fusion weapons, fighter jets F15I, F-16I with nuclear-armed cruise missiles, advanced conventional precision strike capability and three Dolphin submarines armed with nuclear missiles (Cordesman, 2007).

Given Israeli higher yields and more accurate strike capability, in a hypothetical Iranian-Israeli exchange, Israel would possibly strike all major Iranian cities and high value population centers, inflicting up to 28 million dead in short term, therefore, resulting in massive population and economic damage with more than half Iran's industry based in Tehran (Cordesman, 2007). Contrarily, Iran's lower fission yields, combined with less accurate delivery systems, would only give Iran the option of targeting Israel's two largest urban complexes, striking at Haifa and Ashdod-Tel Aviv-Yafo axis and inflicting up to 800,000 dead in short term, while leaving Iranian recovery unattainable and seemingly impossible in short term (Cordesman, 2007).

It could be well observed that Kristensen and Norris refer to the plutonium production, pointing out that Israel's plutonium production makes a total of roughly 840 kg of plutonium for military purposes, highlighting that this amount could potentially be used to build 168 to 210 nuclear weapons. However, they argue that plutonium production could be

a misleading indicator of the actual size of Israel's nuclear arsenal, as a portion is likely stored as a strategic reserve:

Given that Israel probably has a limited portion of its aircraft and missiles that are equipped to deliver nuclear weapons, it would in any case not produce many more war heads than it can actually deliver and this is where the estimates of 200 to 400 warheads strain credibility (Kristensen and Norris, 2014, p. 103).

Second, regardless of the actual size of Israel's nuclear arsenal, Israeli deterrence capabilities is not the only factor that deters Iran from initiating a nuclear strike against Israel; the Iranians consider another significant element in the cost-benefit analysis of launching a military strike against Israel; the USA security guarantees to Israel. The USA posture on this file is unshakable, for example, during a presidential debate in 2008 presidential campaign, Hilary Clinton promised "massive retaliation" against any Iranian attack on Israel. A week later, she warned Tehran that if she were president, the USA could totally obliterate Iran in retaliation for a nuclear strike against Israel (Morgan, 2008).

Realizing that while Iran possesses the scientific, technical and industrial capacity to eventually produce nuclear weapons, whether it would do so was contingent on a political decision. The USA, therefore during the Obama administration, privileged options such as stronger sanctions and military readiness of the USA and its allies that could potentially impinge on such an Iranian decision (Rajiv, 2016, p. 53).

Again, Pape's explanation provides an understanding of the USA stance from Iran during the Obama administration; it could be well observed that deterrence is part of an overall USA strategy, where strong states such as the USA can impose harsh sanctions on other states such as Iran, which stands in its way in the Middle East region. To elaborate, the USA under Obama refrained from initiating military offensive against Iran, fearing Iranian retaliation against American deployments in the Gulf region under sight close to Iran that could be easily targeted by Tehran. Moreover, fearing a spur of a nuclear arms race in the region, and threatening oil prices, Obama pursued non-military means to deal with Iran and along with other world powers, pursued a mixture of diplomacy and increasingly harsh sanctions to dissuade the Iranian regime from pursuing its nuclear program (Sachs, 2012). Hilary Clinton has supported the talks between Iran and the world six powers later in 2012, for the purpose of preventing Iran from advancing its nuclear program.

### **Curbing Iran: Israel preferred policy option**

Israeli concerns regarding Iran's nuclear capabilities have mounted especially after a report in 2011 from the IAEA's Director General to the Board of Governors revealed that the agency has serious concerns regarding possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear program and that Iran has carried out activities prior to the end of 2003 under a structured program of which some might be still ongoing to the development of a nuclear explosive device (IAEA, 2011). After international sanctions were impinged on Iran, Israel still suggested that sanctions have not prevented Iran from advancing its nuclear program. At a meeting with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon in February 2012, and after international sanctions on Iran, former President Shimon Peres stated:

At this time, the UN has a decisive role to play in the war against global terrorism, at the head of which stands Iran [ . . . ] While Israel welcomes the sanctions, in and of themselves they are not enough. I expect the international community not to take any option off the table and to take determined action to prevent Iran from building a nuclear bomb (MFA Israel, 2012).

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Netanyahu took advantage of what was stated in the report to proof the righteousness of Israel's assessments:

Iran is continuing to enrich uranium to a high level of 20% while grossly ignoring the demands of the international community ([MFA Israel, 2012](#)).

Concerned that the Iranian nuclear program would enter a “zone of immunity,” the Israeli approach, however, toward deterring Iran, has been more muscular and proactive. The Israeli leadership has been concerned of what then Defense Minister Ehud Barak called an Iranian immunity zone when substantial portions of the Iranian program are transferred to locations secure from an Israeli air strike, and thus, asserted an early strike ([Sachs, 2012](#)).

In July 2012 Ehud Barak insisted on “a swift and definite stop to the Iranian nuclear project”, later he revealed that Israel had considered attacking Iran at least three times from 2009 to 2012 but did not do so either because the Israel Defense Force did not have the operational capability or due to differences over the proposed course of action among senior members of the Netanyahu cabinet ([Rajiv, 2016](#), p. 52).

Both, the Israeli leadership and the public have been particularly aware of the serious repercussions of a unilateral military action against Iran. Fearing a missile campaign by Iran and its proxies in Lebanon and Gaza that could strike Israeli cities or a prolonged campaign against Israeli and Jewish targets abroad, the Israeli cabinet has, therefore, been deeply divided over proceeding further with a unilateral strike ([Sachs, 2012](#)).

Therefore, unilateral action has not been the preferred policy option for Israel. In fact, Israel favored bringing the USA to strike rather than Israel. Netanyahu criticized Obama's administration refusal to set what he called “red-lines” for Iran's nuclear program. Addressing reporters in Jerusalem on 11 September 2012, he stated:

Those in the international community who refuse to put red lines before Iran don't have a moral right to place a red light before Israel ([Ravid, 2012](#)).

In his visit to Washington earlier in March 2012, Netanyahu met with Obama in the White house and stressed that Israel and the USA share common values, defend common interests and face common enemies ([The White House, 2012](#)). Netanyahu hoped to receive guarantees that the USA will act decisively, and even forcefully, to stop the Iranian nuclear program. He hoped to get a clear statement of what would bring the USA, rather than Israel, to strike ([Sachs, 2012](#)). Obama nevertheless, preferred diplomacy over military action against Iran, therefore, Netanyahu failed to bring the USA to pull the trigger and go to war.

Iran, on its part, has criticized Israel's activism over the concerns regarding its nuclear program while not acknowledging its own nuclear status. At the UNGA in September 2013, President Rouhani urged Israel to join the nuclear nonproliferation treaty “without any further delay” ([Rajiv, 2016](#), p. 52). Israel, however, has continued to accuse Iran of supporting terror-related incidents directed against it after the 2015 historic deal with world powers.

With President Donald Trump in office, surrounding himself with hard core Israeli Zionist lobby who grew up in Orthodox Jewish community and have a core commitment to Zionism including his son in law Jared Kushner, Jason Greenblatt, David Friedman and the Christian Zionists who represent a powerful pro-Israel lobby that comprises Christians who believe the State of Israel is a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy and declare that it is the responsibility of Christians to support the State of Israel and its policies, Israel had an all set opportunity to escalate against Iran. Benjamin Netanyahu pressured the USA administration to retract on its side of the P5 + 1 deal that was signed during the Obama administration. The Trump administration regarded the deal as a losing bet with Iran that

has allowed Tehran to use the economic benefits of the deal to expand its influence, which raised apprehension to the Trump administration (Kelemen, 2018).

Kushner; Trump's son in law, has been appointed by Trump as senior adviser to the president and was designated the Israeli Palestinian portfolio to play a key role in the intractable Palestinian – Israeli conflict by recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, dismissing the existence of millions of Palestinian refugees, and cutting off all humanitarian assistance to Palestinians, therefore undermining trust with the Palestinians (Hirsch, 2019). Furthermore, Kushner has been the brains behind an overall long-term strategy to bring the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia to normalize relations with Israel, even before the Palestinian issue is settled. A strategy that is part of Trump's administration Middle East peace plan, commonly known as the deal of the century, which Kushner envisions as Iran's worst nightmare if successfully implemented, as it brings together so many countries in a much stronger block in the region against Iran (Yingst, 2019).

Ever as the ascendance of Trump to power, Israel has been persistently pushing the world to the brink of calamity so that they can deter Iran and roll back its gains of recent years across the region. Relentless pressure toward escalation with Iran culminated in the USA withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018 and re-imposition of a bunch of sanctions on the Iranian regime; a unilateral decision, which, in turn, will foster Iran's commitment to further develop its nuclear program.

Considering Iran's limited deterrence capacity that does not match that of nuclear weapon states such as Israel, in addition to the implications of initiating an offensive against Israel, Netanyahu advocated a more muscular approach against Iranian proxies in Syria and the Golan height privileging the threat to carry out a military option; and attacked Hezbollah and the Syrian regime sporadically throughout the past years after the break out of the Syrian revolution in 2011.

Israel fears Iran's growing nuclear capacity and Plutonium enrichment and concurrently fears Tehran's efforts to foster and entrench its presence in Syria near the Israeli border. In 2015, Israel carried out an airstrike that killed 12 Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah operatives in Quneitra, Syria, near the Israeli border (Jerusalem Post, 2015). As the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, and despite consistent Israeli denial, Israel has further supported Sunni militants in Syria against the Assad Syrian regime, which is backed by Iran.

To ensure Israel's security on the northern borders, Israel fostered its relationship with Nusra Front–al-Qaeda offshoot – in the Quneitra area situated in south-western Syria in the Golan Heights, to ensure that the war did not reach the border with the Golan Heights while intervening sporadically to disrupt the supply of weaponry to Hezbollah in Lebanon (Spyer, 2018). As the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, Israel has provided medical assistance and treatment in field hospitals in the Israeli occupied Golan Heights for Nusra Front terrorist militias wounded in Syria while fighting Iranian backed Hezbollah in Syria and the Syrian regime.

While Israel envisions Islamic militias such as Nusra, al-Qaeda, ISIS as enemies, yet it is far more irritated by what it perceives as a more disrupting menace; Iran and its proxy Hezbollah. In effect, Israel was content to allow Bashar al-Assad's regime and Iran and the mainly Sunni Islamist militant groups to subject one another to a process of mutual attrition (Spyer, 2018).

Subsequently, to counter Iran's influence in Syria, Israel managed to support anti-Assad militant groups. Israel launched Operation Good Neighbor in 2016, by which the Israeli army acknowledged its support to the Syrians of the Hauran region of southwestern Syria, in addition to providing more than 110 aid operations of various kinds as the establishment

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of the headquarters of the operation, all in the name of humanitarian assistance and good neighbor policy (IDF, 2017). The timing of the operations is revealing, however, as it was formally put in place just months after the Assad regime began its Russian-backed counter-offensive against the militant factions, and ceased when the militants were pushed out of southern Syria in September 2018 (Levy, 2019). After active denial, for the first time, Lieutenant General Gadi Eisenkot, in his final days as IDF Chief of Staff, has confirmed, on the record, that Israel had directly supported anti-Assad Syrian rebel factions in the Golan Heights by arming them (Levy, 2019).

In 2018, however, there has been a sharp increase in the frequency of such attacks and the commencement of the direct targeting of Iranian facilities and personnel because of impending demise of the militias fighting the Syrian regime, which has spurred this shift (Spyer, 2018).

In conjunction with the increasing frequency of Israeli attacks on Syria, the USA announced the same year its conditions for sanctions revision on Iran. Israeli concerns regarding Iran's Plutonium enrichment, growing nuclear capacity and entrenchment in the region, manifested in the 12 conditions for Iran that were laid out by USA Secretary of state Pompeo to review sanctions, notably demanding that Iran expose a full account of the prior military dimensions of its nuclear program to the IAEA, providing it with access to all sites throughout the entire country, ceasing enrichment of Plutonium and closing its heavy water reactor and ending its proliferation of ballistic missiles, in addition to ceasing expanding influence in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, and end its support to proxies in the region; especially Hezbollah (Trevithick, 2018).

For its part, Iran seeks the pursuit of independence in foreign policy that was rooted in the Iranian Revolution, which has impacted the bipolar world as portrayed by Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif (2019). The Iranian strategy emphasizes the role of negotiations in ending disputes. However, as stated by Zarif, Iran favors a strategy based on the coordinated use of a combination of field power and negotiation, which would achieve more solid results. Lack of optimal coordination between the two factors, or sheer neglect of either one, would instead create difficulties or end in failure (Zarif, 2019).

Therefore, Iran has been for so long practicing both factors. On the one hand, regarding the nuclear deal, Iran has endorsed negotiations over its nuclear program in 2015, and has shown interest in preserving the deal, even after the USA unilateral withdrawal from the deal in 2018. In discussing the JCPOA with Russia in May 2019, the Iranian deputy foreign minister referred to the obstacles in the way of implementing the JCPOA and pointed out that "it is now the turn of the remaining signatories to adopt some practical and tangible measures to preserve the nuclear accord" (MFA Islamic Republic of Iran, 2019).

From the Iranian perspective, the deal succeeded in breaking the security consensus against Iran, which had been erected and sustained between 2005 and 2013. This breakthrough has been achieved through reliance on national nuclear capability, in addition to diplomacy and negotiation, leading to the conclusion of the 2015 nuclear deal. As Zarif pointed out:

This is exactly why Israel opposed it from the very outset and throughout the difficult and exhausting process and also why Donald Trump hates it and has ostentatiously called it as the worst deal in history (Zarif, 2019).

Nevertheless, after USA retraction on its part of the nuclear deal, and upon escalation against Iran in the Gulf region in May 2019, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani announced that Iran would no longer keep its enriched Uranium and produced heavy water limited, and that the European signatories of the deal might face Iran's further actions if they did not

fulfill their obligations toward Iran within 60 days and secure Iran's interests. He assured, however, that Iran still chose the path of diplomacy, and that this step was necessary to preserve the deal:

We felt that the nuclear deal needs a surgery and the painkiller pills of the last year have been ineffective. This surgery is for saving the deal, not destroying it (CBS News, 2019).

Furthermore, in response to USA softening statement by Trump's administration, which expressed interest in negotiating with Iran without preconditions, Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei, has dismissed the idea of renegotiating Iran nuclear deal with the USA under current circumstances and viewed the talks as tactic in pressure strategy. Khamenei said "Negotiations on defensive issues means that we give up our defensive capabilities." He said negotiating with the USA would bring nothing but harm (AP, 2019).

In the final analysis, it appears that Israel deterrence strategy to curb Iran's nuclear capabilities and to slow down its nuclear progress and prevailing power in the Middle East region whether by military strikes or USA threats, has not deterred Iran from advancing its ambitions, neither in the nuclear arena nor in supporting its allies across the Middle East. To the contrary, Iran pursued further its multifaceted strategy, building on its own capabilities and simultaneously paves way for diplomacy. Javad Zarif has framed this approach clearly in what he designated "the field power – negotiation optimal coordination."

Despite the persistent Israeli strikes on Hezbollah and the Syrian regime, in addition to the strenuous Israeli campaign to disrupt Iran's effort to consolidate its power in the region and abandon its nuclear ambitions, and despite the USA led sanctions as a supplemental front in this campaign, the Israeli campaign to mobilize the international community and particularly the Gulf countries against Iran, has not succeeded in rolling back Iran's privileges.

Iran's response to the Israeli – USA escalation has demonstrated determination to pursue further its nuclear program, refusing the masked Israeli campaign of unconditional USA talk offer over its nuclear and military capabilities, therefore, privileging defiance over subjugation.

In effect, the Israeli campaign resembles nothing so much as the country's approach toward other troubled areas on its borders, and with Tehran's determination and prolonged arms, it seems likely that a long, open-ended contest lies ahead (Spyer, 2018).

### **Repercussions of Iran's expanding influence: new regional dynamics**

Post the Arab Spring, a new strategic landscape has emerged, that had major implications for Israel and the Gulf region. Following the collapse of central regimes in the Middle East region, the new turmoil has effectively ruled out a major advance in Arab- Israeli diplomacy and enabled Tehran and other regional actors to expand their influence (Inbar, 2012, p. 39).

Iran's influence in the Middle East has garnered momentum after 2011. Perceiving the Arab Spring as an opportunity to spread its presence in the region, Tehran took the Arab Spring as an opportunity to consolidate its influence in some of the Sunni countries whether directly or through its proxies.

This policy naturally became a factor that deeply affected the balance of power in the region and turned to be a source of threat mostly to the Gulf countries (Eksi, 2017, p. 8) but not to Israel. Israel's security is further consolidated and preserved through Iran's prevailing influence in the Middle East region post the Arab Spring as it maintains a status of Arab vulnerability and backwardness that relied heavily on USA support, and has only consolidated Israel's security in the region.

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In effect, Iran's expanding activities in the region has only fostered the regimes in the Gulf to become more dependent on the USA "support" fearing the exported USA version of the so called Iranian threat on the Gulf security. The arms deals concluded between the Gulf and the USA in recent years count as good evidence, especially after the arrival of Trump to power. For instance, in Yemen, the USA has spent billions of dollars on deals for firearms, bombs, weapons systems and military training with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as the start of their war in Yemen against the Iranian backed Houthis. American companies have made deals worth at least \$14bn with the Emiratis and Saudis since March 2015, when the coalition intervened in the conflict in Yemen ([Andrews, 2019](#)).

Saudi Arabia has been the second largest arms importer in the world for the past 5 years and the largest recipient of US weapons, accounting for 13 per cent of USA arms exports. Similarly, the United Arab Emirates increased its arms imports by 63 per cent between 2012 and 2016 ([Salacatin, 2018](#), pp. 2-3).

Regionally, Iran boosted its field power in a turbulent Middle East post 2011, all of which accelerated the Sunni – Shiite rivalry in the region. It achieved the position of regional power and regional leader in the geopolitics of the Middle East ([Eksi, 2017](#), p. 10), especially in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. In Syria, Iran is now part of the Syrian political equation, and seeks to maintain that propitious position, and consolidate it further to institutionalize an acceptable position to enable Iran to use the field power for furtherance of national security and national interests ([Zarif, 2019](#)).

Iran's presence in Iraq is another problematic dilemma for the Sunni majority of Gulf countries, led by Saudi Arabia. An increase of Iran's influence in Iraq after the USA occupation of Iraq in 2003, however, has started to get a new momentum with the Arab Spring process in 2011. The Saudi's negative views of Iran's influence in Iraq and its nuclear program were revealed in Wikileaks documents, which indicated that the Kingdom's need to cooperate with the US on rolling back Iranian influence and subversion in Iraq, is a strategic priority for the King and his government. Moreover, Saudi Foreign Minister Al-Jubeir recalled the King's frequent exhortations to the USA "to cut off the head of the snake" by attacking Iran and putting an end to its nuclear weapons program ([Wikileaks, 2008](#)).

Such Iranian entrenchment has reflected positively on Israel, as it strengthened the security of Israel in the region and fostered an unprecedented open *rapprochement* with the Gulf regimes, although none of the Gulf states have official diplomatic ties with Israel and none have officially recognized Israel. As a matter of fact, the Israeli equation is reversed; Israel's "Periphery Doctrine" created in the early statehood years and shared with Iran amongst other actors against non-Arab countries to preserve Israel's security, has turned after the Arab Spring into a new doctrine against nuclear Iran by which Israel aims to align with the Gulf states and under USA supervision in a wider strategic alliance against Iran under the pretext of facing the "Iranian threat".

Hence, with the rise of Trump to power, Israel has started to accelerate its attempts to foster its relations with the Arab states; notably Israel's foreign policy focused on strengthening ties with the Gulf region to meet the rapid developments reshaping the region. Non-surprisingly, recent strategic assessments in Israel, suggest that Israel can support various groups in diverse theaters in the Middle East to confront Iran, including groups working against the Iranian regime inside Iran, and cooperating with various regional players that have better capabilities handling non-state proxies such as Saudi Arabia. ([Tira and Guzansky, 2018](#), p. 56).

Because of the turmoil that has stormed the Middle East region after the Arab Spring, coordination between the Saudi regime and Israel has been growing rapidly more than ever before. Although the Saudi regime has never confirmed any bilateral cooperation with the

Israeli's, there is, however, manifestations to this non-formal cooperation, by which obviously, Saudi Arabia together with the Gulf States adopted a firm stance over Iran's regional policy and on the Iranian nuclear issue in particular. This bloc of Gulf monarchies is the most united and seems to be the closest to the Israeli position on Iran ([Guzansky, 2015](#), p. 138).

According to prince Turki al-Faisal, former director of Saudi Arabia's intelligence services and former Saudi ambassador to the USA, Saudi Arabia played a leading role in isolating Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government in the early phase of the Syrian crisis. The fall of the Syrian regime; Iran's vital ally, provides a strategic opportunity for Saudi Arabia to weaken Tehran ([Al-Faisal, 2011](#)).

Moreover, Turki al-Faisal has also participated in the [Middle East Security forum \(2017\)](#) held in Temple Emanu-El Streicker Center in New York alongside former Israeli Mossad chief Ephraim Halevy and a number of former IDF officers, including Brig. Gen. (res.) Udi Dekel, Vice President of the Israeli National Security Research Institute. The conference, which was devoted to discussing the situation in Syria, the Iranian nuclear file, Israel's security and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, witnessed an array of viewpoints from analysts and former government officials including the Saudi prince, mostly on Iran and Syria and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in particular ([Middle East Security Forum, 2017](#)).

The Iranian nuclear deal has fostered Israel and Saudi Arabia to take a more aggressive position against Iranian forces and proxies in the region. The agreement reached in Geneva between Iran and the P5 + 1 countries regarding Iran's nuclear program has got Israel and Saudi Arabia even closer. Both countries opposed the agreement they feared would allow Iran to become, in fact, a nuclear threshold state and simultaneously to break out of its isolation in the international arena, thus, offering Iran the opportunity to expand its regional influence ([Guzansky, 2015](#), p. 140).

The bilateral obscure and discreet relations between the two countries became a political strategy centered on Tel Aviv and Riyadh's regional leadership under the supervision of the USA policies, in which Saudi Arabia has supported and funded sectarian policies in Syria, Yemen and Iraq against Iran. A strategy that has benefited Israel and affected most of the countries of the region, by marginalizing their internal and external sovereignty in favor of the stability of Riyadh and Tel Aviv.

The open *rapprochement* between Israel and the Gulf states under the pretext of confronting the common Iranian threat has also manifested in unprecedented growing relations with UAE, Oman and Bahrain. Netanyahu has for years been hinting at growing friendships between Israel and its Gulf Arab neighbours, but those relationships have recently become more open.

In October 2018, Israeli minister of sports and culture Miri Regev, known for her hatred comments about the Palestinians, visited UAE to attend the Judo Grand Competition in Abu Dhabi, where one of the Israeli athletes won gold. The visit raised questions about the growing Gulf ties with Israel and gained particular attention as it was the first time Israel's national anthem, Hatikvah, was played in the UAE. Regev also became the first Israeli minister to visit the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi and sign its guestbook in Hebrew, she wrote:

I am glad that I was privileged to be the first senior Israeli figure to sign the guestbook at the mosque. I chose to do so in Hebrew ([The National, 2018](#)).

The time of the visit is also revealing, as it came at a time when three Palestinian youth were killed in an Israeli airstrike on the Gaza Strip, and only a few days after Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu visited Oman and met with Sultan Qaboos to discuss developments in

the region between various parties, marking the first time an Israeli leader has visited the Gulf country as Shimon Peres in 1996.

Netanyahu's visit to Oman jointly with Mossad intelligence chief Yossi Cohen, who has reportedly been responsible for clandestine talks with Gulf governments, and National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat, came at the invitation of sultan Qaboos and was an apparent sign of warming ties between the two countries ([Middle East Eye, 2018](#)).

Furthermore, Netanyahu's office announced in November 2018 that Netanyahu is scheduled to visit Bahrain in the near future, and that the visit was "a prelude for something bigger in the Middle East", hinting at warming ties with other Arab states ([Middle East Eye, 2018](#)). Few months later in February 2019 Netanyahu convened with Arab leaders at the conference on peace and security in the Middle East in Warsaw under USA auspices to arrange for coordinating future measures against Tehran in what the USA designated a "Middle East Strategic Alliance", an alliance, that is, expected to have far reaching negative implications on regional security by further consolidating Israel's security in the region.

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### **Conclusion**

Understanding Iranian-Israeli dynamics and competition for regional hegemony could be viewed in a broader geo-strategic context, by which both countries irrespective of the rising tension between them today, share common threat perceptions. Israel on one hand, managed early after its foundation to create a "Periphery Doctrine" with non-Arab countries to protect its national security, amongst which was Iran and particular groups in Arab countries. Iran on the other hand perceived the spread of pan-Arabism as an imminent threat to seek to dominate over the Persian Gulf.

After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, strategic interests of the two countries also intersected during the 1980s. However, relations between the two countries soon became strained after the end of the cold war.

Both countries began an early quest for acquiring nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, after the Arab Spring, a new landscape emerged in the Middle East region that postulated a strategic threat to Israel. From the Israeli perspective, Iran stretched its influence in the region through proxies and Israel grew skeptic of its growing nuclear program, fearing it could hold military dimensions. Israel opted for deterrence to curb Iran and has regularly supported Sunni militants against Iran proxies.

During the Obama administration, despite differences over handling the Iran nuclear issue, there has been a steady stream of high-level coordination between Israel and the USA to diffuse the disagreement in handling the Iranian file; whilst Obama endorsed a non-military strategy, Israel preferred a more muscular approach, and the USA officials attempted to dissuade Netanyahu from initiating a unilateral military strike against Iran that would jeopardize Israel security.

Israel's lobbying forces, however, succeeded during the Trump administration to push the USA to withdraw from nuclear agreement in May 2018 because Iran could sign it and not abide by its terms as declared by Mr Trump. Moreover, new sanctions were impinged on Iran where the Iranian regime has been banned from exporting Iranian oil to subdue Iranian power and obstruct the development of its nuclear program.

Maintaining a long standing steady stream that has always ensured Israel's security and emphasized its superiority in the region, the right wing pro-Israel USA administration has consistently rejected the presence of a nuclear power in the region that possess the political will and the national ability to challenge Israel's superiority. The only force capable of challenging this position is Iran.

Nevertheless, despite Israel efforts to curb Iran's prevailing power, the Iranian regime has demonstrated an irrevocable position from its previous posture, which relies mainly on field power presence and negotiations. Iran still maintains pressure cards, owing to its position of strength, it made it clear it refuses USA re-negotiations on defensive issues, insisting that the European signatories fulfill their obligations to the deal.

Furthermore, Iran's growing regional activities fostered rapid dynamics in the Middle East region, by which the Gulf regimes led by the Saudis became more dependent on the USA for preserving the Gulf security against the "Iranian threat". These developments have subsequently led to an unprecedented *rapprochement* between the Gulf regimes and Israel.

In addition to hard balancing, it can be well observed that the notion soft balancing has been used by Israel to frustrate Iranian policies; whether those pertaining to its nuclear program or its entrenchment policies in the Middle East region. Using diplomatic arrangements, Israel fostered its ties with the Gulf regimes in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Oman to undermine Iranian growing presence in the region, which simultaneously intersects with USA interests in the Gulf region.

The triple USA, Saudi, Israel relationship is based on the intersection of the political priorities of the three countries, for the USA, the strategy is to keep the Iranian-Saudi rivalry at heart of the region to keep igniting sectarian war between Shiite and Sunni by which the USA benefits from arms sales to the Saudis and maintains its military bases in the region. Israel benefits by consolidating its regional presence in a newly shaped weak divided Arab region, thus, strengthening Israel as a powerful Jewish state and simultaneously strengthening Saudi Arabia as a leader of the Arab and Muslim world.

The Israeli *rapprochement* strategy with the Gulf is, therefore, part of an overall deterrence strategy that according to the Israeli vision shall bring the Gulf Arab countries in confrontation with Iran, together with Israel land the USA in addition to Egypt and Jordan in a much stronger coalition against Iran. According to the logic of mutual deterrence, the aim is to prevent Iran from carrying out offensive strikes against Israel in the Golan or targeting its drones in Syria or even inside Israel and at the same time, prevent Iran from developing further its nuclear capabilities and producing a nuclear bomb.

In the final analysis, it is, therefore, possible to conclude that the spread of Iranian influence in the region has strengthened Israel's security, and fostered an unprecedented open *rapprochement* with the Gulf regimes, none of which have diplomatic ties with Israel as the case with Egypt and Jordan.

The challenge for Israel, however, lies in how to continue exporting Iran's scarecrow to the Gulf States while at the same time encircle Iran's influence and near-border nuclear and missile activities, therefore, keeping the "Iranian threat" at a distance from the Israeli borders.

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