



## **Dangerously Ignored Intersections: Palestinian Statehood and Regional Nuclear War**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Though the issues of Palestinian statehood and nuclear war are usually treated by Israel as separate perils, they have the potential to intersect. Iran's ties to an eventual state of Palestine, which are likely to be close, could lead to direct military conflict between Iran and Israel, and intra-crisis searches for "escalation dominance" by Tehran and Jerusalem could someday spawn a limited or even regional nuclear war.

When Israel completes its obligatory counter-terrorism war in Gaza, the issue of Palestinian statehood will insistently be raised. This perilous resurrection is foreseeable even though any *de facto* reward for Hamas criminality would be unconscionable. Still, if Israel could be convinced that an inherently flawed "two-state solution" would be preferable to a future of protracted warfare against terrorism, Jerusalem will have to take certain arguments for Palestinian statehood seriously.

The true intent of Palestinian statehood arguments could prove irrelevant to Israeli acceptance. Israeli reasoning would be strategy-driven whether the two-state argument were offered maliciously or in good faith. A prominent example of the well-intentioned alternative would be US President Joe Biden's current calls for a two-state remedy.

For the long-beleaguered State of Israel, accepting or rejecting a state of Palestine would involve only injurious choices, but acceptance would be more injurious and

more plainly an existential peril. At a minimum, any Palestinian state would be irreconcilable, seeking incremental control over Israel in its entirety. This signifies control over what Israel's Islamic foes call "occupied Palestine." In a worst-case scenario, Israel's post-Gaza War efforts at self-defense would involve Iran as a direct enemy belligerent. Conceivably, Turkey could join forces with Iran against Israel, though that scenario would likely be "overruled" by Turkey's membership in NATO.

What would Iranian involvement mean for Israel's security and regional stability? Ultimately, even if Iran were not yet nuclear, a widening conventional or unconventional war with Israel could still elicit Israeli escalations to low-yield nuclear weapons. Such escalations would become increasingly realistic if Iran were to use "only" radiation-dispersal weapons against Israel. If Iran were already a fully nuclear power, however (i.e., in possession of chain reaction-based nuclear explosives), the Middle East could become the world's first (and possibly last) venue for a nuclear war.

There is one more important nuance to consider regarding escalation prospects between Israel and Iran. Because North Korea has ongoing weapons-related ties to both Iran and Syria, even a pre-nuclear Iran might be able to draw upon nuclear support from an already nuclear North Korea. Here a non-nuclear Iran could act against Israel as if it were already a nuclear power. In effect, though perhaps difficult to imagine, a more advanced North Korea would act as surrogate of a less advanced Iran. Apropos of this worrisome scenario for Israel, even a North Korea that shares "only" its advanced ballistic missile technologies with Iran (not its explosive nuclear warheads) could trigger an unpredictable nuclear war.

There is an overriding message here for Israel. Issues of Palestinian statehood and nuclear war with Iran ought never to be treated as separate. Rather, these matters of existential security are potentially intersecting and "force multiplying." For Israel, either an already-nuclear or still-nuclearizing Iran could vastly enlarge the plausible threat posed by a Palestinian state. Reciprocally, Palestinian statehood could vastly expand the existential risks to Israel of a pre-nuclear or nuclear war with Iran.

The holistic relationship between Palestinian statehood and nuclear war is apt to be synergistic and not merely intersectional. It follows that the whole of this core relationship's injurious effect upon Israel could eventually prove greater than the

sum of its parts. But what could usefully represent measurable correlates of this foreseeably catastrophic “whole?”

From the standpoint of science-based prediction, nothing accurate can be said about the likelihood of a nuclear war between Israel and Iran. Israel would nevertheless have no reasonable alternative to offering best-possible estimations. The reason why it is not possible to offer reassuringly scientific assessments of probability is that any such assessments would need to be based on the determinable frequency of relevant past events. Because there has never been a nuclear war, there can be no meaningful estimations of nuclear war’s probability.

Since 2012, the Palestinian National Authority has been recognized by the UN as a "Nonmember Observer State." Looking beyond the Gaza War, if the Palestinian National Authority and Hamas are ever able to restore a functional level of cooperation, a fully sovereign Palestine could emerge. In short order, this furiously adversarial Arab state would become a jihadist platform for continuous war and terror against Israel.

Israel should remain keenly attentive to force multipliers in its struggles against terror-state patron Iran. Virulent synergies between Iranian nuclearization and Palestinian statehood could spawn unique threats to the Jewish State. Though Iranian and Palestinian annihilationist threats are entirely out in the open, they remain largely unacknowledged. Most worrisome are the myriad ways in which a Palestinian state could change the correlation of military forces in the region and the circumstances whereby Iran would be drawn into direct hostilities with Israel.

Understandably, nuclear weapons are generally regarded as destabilizing. In the special case of Israel, however, possession of such weapons could become all that protects the state’s civilian population from catastrophic international aggression. Maintaining stable nuclear deterrence, whether deliberately ambiguous or disclosed, could ultimately prove indispensable to Israel's survival. But this conclusion makes sense only if those nuclear weapons are used for war avoidance or war mitigation, not for the fighting of nuclear war.

Iran is adding to its arsenal of cruise missiles. Even without nuclear warheads, such “fully smart” weapons could lead to accelerated Israel-Iran competition in risk-

taking and a corresponding search for escalation dominance. To succeed in this competition, Israel should prepare to move beyond a policy of deliberate nuclear ambiguity to one of selective nuclear disclosure. The reason would not be to validate Israel's military nuclear capacity (that capacity is already well recognized in Tehran), but to convince Iranian leaders that an Israeli resort to the use of nuclear weapons could be rational.

Ironically, the credibility of Israel's nuclear deterrent could vary inversely with that deterrent's perceived destructiveness. Though counterintuitive, a seemingly too destructive Israeli nuclear force could undermine Israel's deterrent effectiveness.

There are associated matters of law. In its landmark *Advisory Opinion* of 8 July 1996, the International Court of Justice at The Hague ruled: "The Court cannot conclude definitively whether the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be lawful or unlawful in an extreme circumstance of self-defense..." Where the very survival of a state would be at stake, concluded the ICJ ruling, even a tangible use of nuclear weapons could be permissible.

Israel's existential vulnerability to a fully nuclear Iran is manifest. On its face, Israel's small size precludes tolerance of any Iranian nuclear attack. In 2015, this point was made openly by a senior Iranian official: "Israel is a one-bomb state."<sup>1</sup> This means that Israel's annihilation would require only a single Iranian nuclear bomb.

For Israel, it is time for analytic clarity and absolute candor. From a regional or world security standpoint, Israel's nuclear weapons are not the problem. In the Middle East, the most persistent source of war and terror remains a genocidal Arab/Islamist commitment to "excise the Jewish cancer." Faced with the threat of a Palestine that is "free from the River to the Sea" – that is, a Palestine that has completely destroyed and replaced Israel – the Jewish State will need to acknowledge that Palestinian statehood is not just another tactical enemy expedient. Indeed, a cartographic genocide has already been inflicted upon Israel. All official Palestinian maps describe Israel as "Occupied Palestine". The Jewish State has already been eliminated.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by Maj. Gen. (ret.) Yaakov Amidror, "A Problem of Nuclear Proportions," BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 290, BESA Center for Strategic Studies, Israel, March 1, 2015.

With a selectively revealed nuclear weapons posture, Israel could more reliably deter a rational Iranian enemy's unconventional attacks and perhaps most of its large conventional aggressions. Additionally, with such an updated deterrence posture, Israel could, if necessary, launch non-nuclear preemptive strikes against Iranian hard targets and against associated counterforce capabilities.

Left in place, these assets could threaten Israel's physical survival with impunity. In the absence of acknowledging possession of certain survivable and penetration-capable nuclear weapons, therefore, Israel's lawful acts of preemption ("anticipatory self-defense") could trigger the onset of a much wider war. The reason is straightforward: There would then remain no convincing threat of an unacceptable Israeli counter-retaliation.

The decision to bring Israel's "bomb" out of the "basement" (that is, Israel's calculated end to "deliberate nuclear ambiguity") would not be easy. But the stark realities of facing not only a nuclear-capable Iran but also assorted other nuclear aspirants – sometimes in synergy with anti-Israel terrorists – obligate immediate reconsideration of "deliberate nuclear ambiguity." As a corollary, Jerusalem will need to clarify that its multi-level active defenses would operate in tandem with Israel's counterforce nuclear retaliations, not in their stead.

All of this suggests that Israeli security assessments of Palestinian statehood and Iranian nuclearization should be undertaken together, and with due regard for complex synergistic intersections. For Israel, the cumulative impact of Palestinian statehood and Iranian nuclearization would be substantially greater than the sum of their parts. The poet Auden's words should ring as a galvanizing prophecy: *"Defenseless under the night; our world in stupor lies."*

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