



Navigating Chaos: Israel, Nuclear Ambiguity and the “Samson Option”

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel’s ship of state, facing rough seas, is at high risk and requires clearer rules of navigation. During this period of deep complexity, Israel will need to clarify its strategic direction. The terrorists of Hamas are the tip of Iran’s much larger spear. Israel’s current war against jihadist criminality could thus turn into a wider and more damaging war with Iran. Such a war could emerge as a “bolt from the blue” or incrementally. Ultimately, it could involve the United States, Russia, China, Pakistan, and/or North Korea. How might Jerusalem prevent or manage any such derivative conflicts? Israel must consider whether there is a productive role to be played by the “Samson Option.”

In any rationality-based strategic calculus, the “Samson Option” would refer not to a last-resort act of national vengeance but to a persuasive limit on existential threats. When taken together with Israel's intentionally ambiguous nuclear strategy, an outdated doctrine commonly referred to as “deliberate nuclear ambiguity” or “Israel's bomb in the basement” (*amimut* in Hebrew), more compelling threat postures could prove effective. To be truly promising, however, an Israeli Samson Option would need to 1) coincide with an incremental and selective end to “deliberate nuclear ambiguity” and 2) pertain to Iran directly, not just to terrorist proxies. There are no conceivable circumstances in which Samson could offer Israel useful applications regarding Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, or any other jihadist foes.

Israeli strategists will need to consider factors beyond what is taking place right now between Israel and its jihadist adversaries. Because military crises in other parts of the world could spill over into the Middle East, strategic planners should begin to clarify Israel's operational preparations regarding Samson. This is especially the case where a spill-over could involve the threat or actual use of nuclear weapons.

Though Iran is still "only" pre-nuclear, it already has the capacity to use radiation dispersal weapons and/or launch conventional rockets at Israel's Dimona nuclear reactor. Moreover, Tehran has close ties to Pyongyang, and it is not inconceivable that a nuclear North Korea might operate as a strategic stand-in for a not-yet-nuclear Iran.

For disciplined Israeli strategists, geopolitical context matters. There can be no logic-based assessment of probabilities because the events under consideration would be unprecedented. In logic and mathematics, true probabilities can never be ascertained *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. They can be drawn only from the determinable frequency of pertinent past events.

These are not narrowly political or intuitive calculations. As an operationally meaningful concept, the Samson Option references a residual deterrence doctrine founded upon credible threats (whether implicit or explicit) of overwhelming nuclear retaliation or counter-retaliation. These are unconventional threats (ancient Chinese strategist Sun-Tzu would call them "unorthodox") to thwart more-or-less expected enemy state aggressions. Reasonably, any such massive last-resort doctrine could enter into force only where enemy aggressions would imperil Israel's continued existence as a viable nation-state. In the absence of expected aggressions from Iran, Israel would more prudently rely upon an "escalation ladder."

For doctrinal clarity, Israel's nuclear forces should always remain oriented to deterrence *ex ante*, never to revenge *ex post*. Considered as potentially final elements of strategic dissuasion, it would do Israel little good to proffer Samson-level threats in response to "ordinary" or less than massive forms of enemy attack. Even where the principal operational object for Israel would be counter-terrorist success against Hamas, Hezbollah, etc., invoking Samson could make sense only vis-à-vis Hamas

state patron Iran or Iran's nuclear patron North Korea. In such nuanced calculations, assumptions of rationality could prove problematic.

For Israel's nuclear deterrent to work against a still non-nuclear Iran, it is virtually inconceivable that it would need to include a Samson Option. In any crisis between Israel and Iran involving jihadist terror, Israel could almost certainly achieve "escalation dominance" without employing Samson. But if Iran were already an authentic nuclear adversary, its capacity to enhance surrogate terror capabilities would exceed any pre-nuclear constraints of competitive risk-taking. In these circumstances, Samson could prove necessary.

Israel's basis for launching a preemptive strike against Iran without Samson could be rational only before that state turned verifiably nuclear. A foreseeable non-Samson plan for preemption would involve more direct Iranian involvement in the continuing terror war against Israel on behalf of Hamas, Hezbollah, etc. By setting back Iranian nuclear efforts and infrastructures, such pre-Samson involvement could offer Israel an asymmetrical power advantage in the region. This larger opportunity would be the result of Israel's not yet having to fear a nuclear war against Iran.

There would be related matters of intra-crisis communications. As an element of any ongoing strategic dialogue, the basic message of an Israeli Samson Option would need to remain uniform and consistent. It should signal to an adversary state the unstated promise of a counter-city ("counter value") nuclear reprisal. Israel would also need to avoid signaling to its Iranian adversary any sequential gradations of nuclear warfighting.

Israel's "bottom line" reasoning would likely be as follows: *For Israel, exercising a Samson Option threat is not apt to deter any Iranian aggressions short of nuclear and/or massively large-scale conventional (including biological) first strikes. Prima facie, Samson can do little to prevent Iran from its enthusiastic support of anti-Israel jihadists.*

Whatever the Samson Option's precise goals, its key objective should remain constant and conspicuous. This objective is to keep Israel "alive," not (as presented in Biblical imagery) to stop the Jewish State from "dying alone." In this preemptory objective, Israeli policy should deviate from the Biblical Samson narrative.

Ultimately, Samson, in all relevant military nuclear matters, should be about how best to manage urgent processes of strategic dissuasion. At least for now, Israel's presumed nuclear strategy, though not yet clearly articulated, is oriented toward nuclear war avoidance and not to nuclear war fighting. From all standpoints, this represents Israel's only correct orientation. Samson's overriding rationale should be to serve Israel as a persuasive "high-end" component of nuclear deterrence and of corollary preemption options.

The Samson Option could never protect Israel as a comprehensive nuclear strategy by itself. This option should never be confused with Israel's more generalized or "broad spectrum" nuclear strategy, one that would seek to maximize deterrence at incrementally less apocalyptic levels of military engagement.

At this point, various questions will need to be raised. Above all: *How can the Samson Option best serve Israel's general strategic requirements?* Though the primary mission of Israel's nuclear weapons should be to preserve the Jewish State - not to wreak havoc upon foes when all else has seemingly been lost - obvious preparations for a Samson Option could still improve Israel's nuclear deterrence and preemption capabilities.

As soon as possible, even during the current Gaza war with Hamas, Jerusalem will need to shift from "deliberate nuclear ambiguity" to "selective nuclear disclosure." Among other things, this explicit shift would allow Israel to clarify that its nuclear weapons are not too large for actual operational use against Iran. In essence, this complex clarification would be the reciprocal of Israel's Samson Option and would cover the complete spectrum of Israel's nuclear deterrence options.

There will be corresponding legal issues. Israeli resorts to conventional and defensive first strikes could prove permissible or law-enforcing under authoritative international law. In such cases, Israeli preemptions would contain a jurisprudential counterpart to nuclear weapons use. This counterpart should be referenced formally as "anticipatory self-defense."

Concerning long-term Israeli nuclear deterrence, recognizable preparations for a Samson Option could help convince Iran or other designated enemy states that massive aggressions against Israel would never be gainful. This could prove most compelling if Israel's "Samson weapons" were 1) coupled with some explicit level of

nuclear disclosure (thereby effectively ending Israel's longstanding posture of nuclear ambiguity); 2) recognizably invulnerable to enemy first strikes; and 3) "counter-city"/"counter-value" in declared mission function. Additionally, in view of what nuclear strategists sometimes refer to as the "rationality of pretended irrationality," Samson could enhance Israeli nuclear deterrence by demonstrating a more evident Israeli willingness to take existential risks.

On occasion, the nuclear deterrence benefits of "pretended irrationality" could depend on prior Iranian awareness of Israel's counter-city or counter-value targeting posture. Such a posture was recommended some 20 years ago by the Project Daniel Group in its confidential [report](#) to then Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon. Residually, however, to best ensure that Israel could still engage in nuclear warfighting if its counter-value nuclear deterrence were to fail, Israel would more openly adopt a "mixed" counter-value/counter-force nuclear targeting doctrine. It should always be understood by Israeli military planners and strategic decision makers that actual nuclear warfighting is to be reserved only for "End of the Third Temple" scenarios.

In reference to strategies of preemption, Israeli preparations for a Samson Option - explicit, recognizable and not just *sotto voce* - could help convince Israel's leadership that defensive first strikes could sometimes be gainful. These Israeli leaders could then expect that certain conventional preemptive strikes¹ would be undertaken with reduced expectations of unacceptably destructive enemy retaliation. This relatively optimistic expectation would depend upon a) prior Israeli decisions concerning nuclear disclosure; b) Israeli perceptions of the effects of such disclosure on enemy retaliatory intentions; c) Israeli judgments about enemy perceptions of Samson weapons vulnerability; and d) presumed Iranian awareness of Samson's counter-city force posture.

In all cases involving Samson and Israeli nuclear deterrence, visible last-resort nuclear preparations could enhance Israel's preemption options by underscoring a bold national willingness to take existential risks. However, displaying such risks could become a double-edged sword. The fact that these are uncharted waters and there exist no precedents from which to extrapolate science-based probabilities means Israel would need to move with determination and caution.

What about “pretended irrationality?” That complex calculus could become a related part of Samson. Israel’s leaders will need to remain mindful of this integration. Brandished too “irrationally,” Israeli preparations for a Samson Option, though unwitting, could encourage Iranian preemptions. This peril would be underscored by pressures on both Israel and Iran to achieve intra-crisis “escalation dominance.” Also significant in this unpredictable environment of competitive risk-taking would be either or both sides’ deployment of expanding missile defenses.²

This harkens back to the early days of Cold War nuclear deterrence between the United States and the Soviet Union, days of “mutually assured destruction” or MAD. Either Israeli or Iranian efforts to reduce nuclear retaliatory force vulnerabilities could incentivize the other to more hurriedly strike first; that is, to “preempt the preemption.” In reference to international law, close attention would then need to be directed toward the peremptory rules of “military necessity.”

If left to itself, neither deterred nor preempted, Iran could threaten to bring the Jewish State face-to-face with Dante's Inferno. Such a portentous scenario has been made more credible by the recent strategic strengthening of Iran³ by its tighter alignment with North Korea and its surrogate fighters in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. At some not-too-distant point, a coordinated Iran-Hezbollah offensive (complementing the Iran-Hamas offensive in Gaza) could signal more imminent existential perils for Israel. By definition, all such [synergistic intersections](#) would be taking place within the broadly uncertain context of “Cold War II.”

In extremis atomicum, these hazards could become so unique and formidable that employing a Samson Option would represent the only available strategic option for Israel. In the best of all possible worlds, Israel would have no need to augment or even maintain its arsenal of deterrent threat options - especially untested nuclear components - but this ideal reconfiguration of world politics remains a long way off. In that ideal world, Israel could anticipate the replacement of *realpolitik* (power politics) with Westphalian international politics. Such a replacement would be based on the awareness that planet Earth is an inter-dependent and organic whole.

Plainly, the time for such replacement has not yet arrived. It follows that Jerusalem will need to prepare visibly for a possible Samson Option. The point of this doctrinal

imperative would not be to give preference to any actual applications of Samson, but to best ensure that Israel could deter all survival-threatening enemy aggressions.

For the moment, Israel remains in protracted war with Hamas. It can succeed in this conflict only by weakening jihadist state-sponsor Iran. In the best-case scenario, Iran would remain non-nuclear and Israeli management of Iranian terror support would remain within the bounds of conventional deterrence. If, however, Iran were permitted to cross the nuclear weapons threshold by acquiring chain-reaction nuclear weapons (not just radiation dispersal weapons), Israel's subsequent efforts at deterrence of Iran would become vastly more problematic. At that point, *ipso facto*, Israel could require a Samson Option to maintain its "escalation dominance."

There does exist an intermediate, if paradoxical, scenario for Israel. If Iran should become involved in any direct military action against Israel before becoming a fully nuclear adversary, the Jewish State could find itself with a strategic and law-enforcing opportunity to preemptively destroy Iranian nuclear infrastructures before they become operational. Though advancing such a scenario could also create the false impression of planned Israeli aggression, it would more correctly represent permissible self-defense. Most importantly, of course, such an Israeli preemption could prevent a full-scale nuclear war with Iran.

How should Israel navigate chaos? Whether in the Old Testament or in more-or-less synchronous Greek and Roman thought, chaos can be understood as something potentially positive: an intellectual *tabula rasa* which, if thoughtfully "filled in," can prepare the world for all possibilities, both sacred and profane. In essence, chaos can represent an inchoate place from which an expanding civilizational opportunity can still originate.

Such thinking is unorthodox, to be sure, but for Israel it could prove manifestly useful. With such thinking, chaos is never just a "predator" that swallows everything whole: omnivorous, callous, indiscriminate, and without higher purpose. Here, chaos is considered instead as an auspicious "openness," a protean realm from within which new kinds of opportunity can be revealed.

This means the chaos in the Middle East need not necessarily be interpreted by Israel's senior military planners as a harbinger of further regional violence and

instability. In some hard-to-conceptualize respects, at least, such chaos could represent a condition for national security and survival. Though there are still rough seas ahead, their waves could be harnessed for a purposeful strategic direction.

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¹ *In extremis*, even an unconventional or expressly nuclear preemptive strike could be lawful. In this connection, see *Summary of the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons*, ICJ Advisory Opinion 1996.

² On Israel and ballistic missile defenses, see earlier writings co-authored with IDF Major General (res.) Isaac Ben-Israel, also a former Head of the Israel Space Agency: Louis René Beres and Major-General (IDF/ret.) Isaac Ben-Israel, "Think Anticipatory Self-Defense," *The Jerusalem Post*, October 22, 2007; Professor Beres and Major-General Ben-Israel, "The Limits of Deterrence," *Washington Times*, November 21, 2007; Professor Beres and MG Ben-Israel, "Deterring Iran," *Washington Times*, June 10, 2007; and Professor Beres and MG Ben-Israel, "Deterring Iranian Nuclear Attack," *Washington Times*, January 27, 2009.

³ For earlier assessments of threats from Iran, see Louis René Beres and John T. Chain (General/USAF/ret.), "Could Israel Safely Deter a Nuclear Iran"?, *The Atlantic*, August, 2012; and Professor Louis René Beres and General Chain, "Israel and Iran at the Eleventh Hour," *Oxford University Press* (OUP Blog), February 23, 2012. General Chain was Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Strategic Air Command (CINCSAC).