

## Will Israel take military strike against Iran?

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### **Will Israel take military strike against Iran?**

Will Israel take military strike against Iran? The intent of this paper is to answer this question. More specifically, will the enduring conflict between Israel and Iran affect the Israeli decision-making towards the Iranian nuclear program? The article begins with the theoretical consideration of the enduring conflict. This is followed by the intra-Israel debates on the military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. The author argues that the possibility of Israeli military strike against Iran is higher than we expect because of the structure of enduring conflict between the two states. In particular, Israeli negative perception of Iran, Israeli self-image as a 'victim', and Israeli history of attacking enemies without allies' support may push Israel to take a military strike against Iran.

**[Key words: Israel, Iranian nuclear program, enduring conflict]**

### I . Introduction

In June 2013, Hassan Rohani was elected as the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. After taking the oath office on August 4, Rohani expressed his willingness to improve the economy and to reduce the high tension between Iran and the

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outside world by addressing sanctions related to Iran's nuclear program. The US welcomed Rohani's willingness and expressed hope of resolving the international community's deep concerns over Iran's nuclear program. However, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu said that despite the change of Iranian President Iran's intention is still to develop a nuclear capacity and nuclear weapons in order to destroy the State of Israel. Netanyahu strongly believes that "the goal of the regime has not been replaced" (CNN August 5, 2013). Before that, Netanyahu said on 14 July that Israel had a narrower timetable than Washington, implying he may have to take unilateral action to halt Iran's nuclear program.

Will Israel take a unilateral military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities in order to survive? If Israel is committed to take a military action, what makes Israel to do so? If Israel is not, what makes not to do so? To answer these questions, I will begin by introducing the theory of enduring conflict to describe and explain the relationship between Israel and Iran. Enduring conflict theory is well known by its explanatory power of long term conflicts such as Israel/Iran conflict. Next, I will move on to the intra Israel debates between contra and pro military options. Israeli threat perception from Iran and Israeli debates on Iranian nuclear program is discussed. This is followed by the prospects for international crisis between Israel and Iran. The core question of this article is: does the enduring conflict between Israel and Iran effect Israeli decision making against Iranian nuclear program, and thus resulting in a serious militarized dispute? I will argue that the possibility of Israeli military strike on Iranian nuclear program still exists because of the enduring conflict between the two states.



## II. Enduring Conflict between Israel and Iran

Two major studies that deal with long term conflicts such as Israel/Iran are 'enduring rivalry' theory and 'protracted conflict' theory. 'Enduring conflict' is the author's compound word of enduring rivalry with protracted conflict.

Gochman and Maoz (1984) define enduring rivalries as pairs of states that have engaged most often in militarized disputes with another. Most of the enduring rivalry theorists regard conflicting national interest (e.g., territory and national security) as the causes of enduring conflicts (Williams and McGinnes 1992; Diehl 1985). Contrary to the scholars of enduring rivalry, most scholars of protracted conflict tend to emphasize the importance of group identity as a source of a protracted conflict. They believe that protracted conflicts are distinguishable from non protracted conflicts in terms of their focus on identity and the rights and privileges associated with identities (Azar and Farah 1981, 320). Enduring conflicts thus are characterized by competitive zero sum relationships over not only national interest but also national identity.

States that are engaged in these enduring conflicts have been most susceptible to nuclear acquisition because of existential fears and negative perceptions against their rival states. A critical question is to figure out how the involved states interact with each other in relation to nuclear facility development (Paul 1996). States with the most potent nuclear propensities are in three regions of the world: South Asia, East Asia and Middle East. In South Asia, the enduring conflict between India and Pakistan and between India and China are salient cases of enduring conflict. In East Asia, the continuous conflict between the two Korea and that of between North Korea and the US engenders the strong incentive for nuclear acquisition by the parties. In the Middle East, the Arab Israeli enduring conflict has engendered



nuclear acquisition by Israel and the search for countervailing capability by Iraq, Libya and Iran. All of these example states<sup>1)</sup> that were trying to acquire nuclear facilities are experiencing enduring conflicts.

Israel and Iran had close relationship during the period of Pahlavi dynasty. Their relationship, however, has changed into hostile one since the Islamic Revolution by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. The Islamic Revolution ushered a new ideology with its recalculation of national interests. This resulted in the deterioration of the two states' relationship. Since then, the two countries have not engaged in diplomatic relations and have experienced tension. In particular, Iranian development of nuclear technology produced acute tension between Israel and Iran. The nuclear program of Iran coupled with Iranian rhetoric of anti Israel has given serious threat perceptions to Israel. Many Iranian messages against Israel emphasize the annihilation of Israel. For example, in a May 2012 speech, Iran' s Ministry Chief of Staff said that the Iranian nation is standing for its cause and that is the full annihilation of Israel (*The Daily Caller* May 21, 2012). Hojjat al Eslam Ali Shirazi, the representative of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said on 2 October 2012 that Iran required only 23 hours in order to eradicate Israel and alleged that Israel was close to annihilation (Paraszczuk 2012).

Against Iranian rhetoric, Israel also claimed its position indicating the possibility of military strike. On 8 May 2006, then Israeli Vice Premier Shimon Peres stated that Iran should remember that it also be wiped off the map (*Dominican Today*, May 8, 2006). On 27 July 2009, then Israel' s Defense Minister Ehud Barak warned Iran that a military strike on its nuclear facilities was still an option. On 5 November 2012, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reiterated his willingness to take a unilateral attack on Iran' s nuclear facilities even without US support (Jodi 2012).

In sum, both Israel and Iran have very negative perception of their enemies.

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1) South Korea is an exception.



Such negative perceptions originated from each state' s perceived threats to their national interest and ideology. Each state pledged their commitment to eliminate the other side. Accordingly, both Israel and Iran were committed to acquire nuclear capabilities. The relationship between Iran and Israel comprises an enduring conflict.<sup>2)</sup> I now turn to the Israeli discussions concerning Iranian nuclear program.

### III. Israeli Debates on Iranian Nuclear Program

#### 1. Israeli Threat Perception of Iranian Nuclear Program

Israeli decision makers, the public concern for Israeli national interest and the identity from the Iranian development of nuclear facilities. The Israeli concerns with national interest are security and regional influence. Israeli people' s concern on their national identity occurs because they believe that Iranian ideology is very hostile against the existence of Israel.

##### 1) Israeli National Security

The history of Israel and Iran relations shows that Israeli leaders have not always viewed Iran as a strategic challenge. Israeli has not perceived Iran as a major military threat until the early 1990s. However, during the 1990s, Israel came to be more cautious with Iran because of Iranian development of long range missiles and nuclear program. In 2002, the Natanz nuclear site<sup>3)</sup> raised serious concerns to Israeli leaders. In 2003, Iran became the top of Israel' s national security concern.

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2) For the previous studies on Iran/Israel nuclear confrontation, see Allian and Simon (2010), Katz and Hendel (2012), Khan (2009), and Grace (2013).

3) Natanz is a city of Iran. The Natanz nuclear facility is generally recognized as Iran' s central facility for enrichment with over 5000 centrifuges.



Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon asked the Chief of Mossad to prevent Iran's nuclear program (Maelman and Javedanfar 2007, 166). Israel perceived serious threats that might lead Israelis to a mass exodus of Jews from an Israel under nuclear threat, weakening eventually the state itself (Malka 2011, 59). The Iranian nuclear issue thus became the top security agenda in Israel.

## 2) Regional Influence

Israel is also concerned about its declining regional influence from Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapon. The reasons are as followings (Kaye et al. 27-30). Firstly, Israel worries that Iran would be more provocative and act more aggressively toward Israel when Iran obtains nuclear capabilities. Israel calculates that Israel may not be able to act as freely against Iran if Iran acquires nuclear bombs. Secondly, Israel worries that an Iranian nuclear bomb may make the many Arab states closer to Iran. We know that many Arab countries are hostile toward Iran. But Israel fears that if Iran acquires a nuclear capability, then Arab resistance to Iran would be weakened because Iranian power and retaliation capabilities would increase. Thirdly, Israel worries the domino effect of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. To Israel, a nuclear Iran would trigger further nuclear proliferation of the Middle East.<sup>4)</sup> Such a scenario could eventually lead the Middle East region to multi-polar nuclear regional system. Such situation could threaten regional stability, resulting in Israel in the complex situation without suitable deterrence conditions (Sadr, 2005, cited in Kaye et al. 012, 30; Zanotti 2012, 18).

## 3) Iranian Ideology

To Israeli leaders' perception, Iran is a bitter ideological enemy that is

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4) To name a few, Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia could be such would be possessors of nuclear facilities.



determined to bring about the physical annihilation of Israel (Pedatzur 2007, 513-4). Many Israeli analysts tend to Iranian acquisition of nuclear bombs in relation to Iran's ideological ambition of destroying Israel. Israeli leaders thus believe that Iranian ideology is a serious factor driving Iranian policy and that actual use of nuclear weapons against Israel is a viable possibility (Kaye et al. 2012, 31-32). In addition, Israeli leaders equate the Iran's anti-Israel ideology with the German's Holocaust. They identify the threats originating from Iran with the Hitler's Nazi Germany. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, for example, stated that Iran is Germany in 1938 (quoted in Benn 2009). Whether or not the Israeli analogy of Iran with German is the 'use' or 'abuse' of history (Neustadt and May 1986; Vertzberger 1990, Ch. 6) is not clear. However, it would be clear that most of the Israeli leaders have deep-rooted negative perception of Iran because of Iranian ideology coupled with Iranian Nuclear program

## **2. Israel's Two Options on Iranian Nuclear Program**

As the previous discussion suggests, it is no doubt that Israeli people perceive a serious threat from Iranian nuclear program. However, the strategy of how to deal with Iranian nuclear threat differs among Israeli leaders. Some suggest a military strike against Iran, the others think military strike is a not a wise strategy. Some analyst regard the US support is necessary, other say it is not. I now turn to the intra-Israel discussion on Iranian nuclear program.

### **1) Contra-military Strike Option**

Some Israeli leaders express serious caution about a military strike option. They are not confident of the effectiveness of military attack, Israeli capability to deter Iranian retaliation, and the possibility of Iranian taking advantage of Israeli military



action. The reasons of contra military strike option are as elaborated as followings.

Firstly, some Israeli people believe that the effectiveness of Israeli strike against Iran has limit. For example, Pedatzur argues that Israel could attack only a few Iranian targets through a one time surprise attack. This is because Iranian nuclear sites are so widely dispersed. Accordingly, Israeli limited attack could only postpone the completion of the Iranian nuclear program (Pedatzur 2007, 524). Secondly, some analysts who are not in favor of a military strike emphasize the possibility of retaliation or second strikes from Iran and its military allies. They warn that if Israel attacks Iran, then Israel should face Iranian retaliation through ballistic missile attacks directed against Israel (quoted in Kaye et al. 2012, 42)<sup>5</sup>. Lastly, some analysts argue that Israeli first strike against Iran could give Iran a justification of developing nuclear bombs. For example, Meir Dagan who was a head of Mossad argues that an Israeli military attack would only give Iran the opportunity to say 'Look, see, we were attacked by the Zionist enemy and we clearly need to have it [nuclear bomb] (Pennick, quoted in Zanotti 2012, 5).

## 2) Pro-military Strike Option

From the above discussion, we have seen that many Israeli leaders are very cautious on military attack on Iran. However, a number of other Israeli leaders are favorably inclined toward a military option. Why are they so?

Firstly, some Israeli leaders believe that the postponement itself of the Iranian nuclear program is worth to take a military option. We have seen that many Israeli leaders have consensus that military action might only postpone, not eliminate,

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5) Even Benny Begin and Moshe Yaalon who are the most hard line figures in Israeli decision making body argue that a military strike would cause a massive counterattack from Iran and its proxies. Thus they emphasized that military strike should be a last resort (Pfeffer 2011).





Iran's nuclear program. However, other officials advocate a military attack just because of the possibility of postponement of the Iranian nuclear program. They prefer a military strike to no action. They believe the effects of the postponement itself. In particular, Barak the Israeli Minister of Defense—simply said that Israeli objective is 'delay'. He argued that if Israel is successful in pushing off the Iranian nuclear program by six or ten years, then there is a good chance that the current regime in Iran will not survive until the critical moment (Shavit 2012).

Secondly, from the perspective of prospect theory, we may assume that Israel has strong incentive to attack Iran. Prospect theory maintains that human beings tend to give more weight to losses than to gains, and that they are generally risk averse for gains and risk acceptance for losses (Kahneman and Tversky 1979; Jervis 1992). The prospect theory suggests that conflicts and wars are most likely to occur when both adversaries anticipate the losses resulting from no fighting (Jervis 1992). Israeli officials who are in favor of a military option against Iran reasons that "inaction is bound to bring about far worse consequences" (Inbar, cited in Kaye et al. 2012, 41). Accordingly, many Israeli leaders prefer a military action to no action.

Thirdly, Israeli leaders' negative perception of Iran and Iranian nuclear program was a strong factor in making Israeli decision makers to be hard liners. To Israeli leaders, Iran with nuclear weapons is a serious threat to Israeli existence. As we have seen in the previous section, Israeli threat perception originated in part from Iranian leaders' long standing pronouncements against the existence of Israel. For example, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution, decreed that elimination of Zionist regime in Israel was religious duty. His successor Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i has repeatedly referred to Israel as a "cancerous tumor" (quoted in Zanotti et al. 2012, fn. 72). Such Iranian rhetoric against Israel coupled with Iranian development of nuclear facilities could give Israel serious



threat perception. Such serious threat perception in turn may motivate Israeli leaders to consider a military strike a wise option.

#### IV. Prospects for International Crisis

Compared to non-protracted conflicts, protracted conflicts such as enduring conflicts have more possibility of open warfare between rival states. In examining the relationship between protracted conflict and international crisis, Brecher (1993, 162) found that during 1918-1988, 47% of protracted conflicts, while only 30% of non-protracted conflicts, experienced direct violent triggers or severe violence in the escalation phase. Are there any possibility for Israel and Iran to experience international crisis or war? Although the newly elected Iranian President Rouhani suggested a discussion on Iranian nuclear program with the US, Israeli leaders' prolonged perception of Iran as a threat to Israel's existence, combined with deeply rooted anti-Israeli sentiment, may make it difficult to quickly reverse Israeli policy toward Iran. From the perspective of enduring conflict theory, I would argue that Netanyahu is going to attempt to take a military strike against Iran. The reasons are as followings.

Above all, the Israel's negative perception of Iran and Israeli commitment against Iran could spur a military strike against Iran. In an enduring conflict, both the negative image of the adversary and the commitments against the enemy may seriously bias decision makers' coping strategies. When a state has a very negative image of the other and has strengthened its commitment against the enemy, then the state could easily fall into temptation not to hesitate to fight if threats to its national interest and/or identity appear. The existence of a stressful



and biased psychological atmosphere makes it more likely that international crises or wars arising in a context of enduring conflict (Chang 2008, 41). Such a temptation of striking Iran could occur because of Israel's perception of and commitment against Iran.

Israeli self image has also powerful effect on Israeli decision making concerning military strike. In rivalry psyche, the involved states have victimized image of them and thus may have more aggressive attitudes against the enemy. Israel also have a sense of growing victimization leading to a mentality could make the military option more viable. Such a psych or self image could grow more in part from a sense of isolation. An Israeli military official noted that Israeli have thought by 2005 that no one else in the world was as worried about Iran as Israeli were. Such Israeli fears of standing alone in its concern over Iranian nuclear program may push Israel to take military strike option (Kaye et al, 2012, 46). One Israeli journalist argued that if Iran is not deterred successfully and if the US does not attack Iran, then Israel would launch an attack on its own (Nahum Barnea, quoted in Sherwood 2012).

In addition, the Israeli history of unilateral military action against its enemy may lead Israel to take a military strike on Iran. Despite the fact that the US position is an important consideration affecting calculations about Israeli military option, it should also be emphasized that Israel might strike Iran on its own when it perceives serious threat from Iranian nuclear program. A poll shows that 75% of Israeli would support a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities even if the Obama administration opposed Israel taking such military action (BESA/ADL Survey 2009). Netanyahu emphasized that Israel has a history that it launched a military strike without US support such as the 1948 declaration of statehood, the initiation of the 1967 war, and the 1981 strike on Osirak (quoted in Zanotti et al, 2012, 33). Moreover, Netanyahu said in March 5 2012 AIPAC speech that Israel must always



have the ability to defend itself, by itself, against any threat (Netanyahu 2012). Such Netanyahu's willingness and Israeli peoples' support of Netanyahu's argument may push the Israel to take military action against Iran, in particular when Israel feels extreme sense of isolation and standing alone.

## V. Concluding Remarks

The new Iranian President Rohani is attempting to have a renewed US-Iranian negotiation on the Iranian nuclear program. However, responding to Rohani's diplomatic approach, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu emphasized that the only thing in the last 20 years that has helped stop Iran's nuclear program were pressures and the explicit threats of military action (*L.A. Times*, 08 August 2013). To him, unilateral military action against Iran is still the only option for Israel. We know that Israeli long-standing national security doctrine is "defend itself, by itself". Netanyahu is a strong believer on such a doctrine. He said on 24 January 2012 that Israeli could not abandon their future to the hands of others, and that the Israeli duty is to rely on Israeli alone (Rubin 2012). In this context, whether or not Israel will take a unilateral military strike against Iran was one of the major questions in this article.

To answer the above mentioned question, I borrowed insights from enduring conflict theory. The core question of this article thus was whether or not the enduring conflict between Israel and Iran would affect the Israeli decision-making on military strike against Iran. To answer the core question, I explained enduring conflict theory and the case of enduring conflict between Israel and Iran. I showed that national interest such as security and national identity are important factors in



experiencing an enduring conflict. In the section of Israeli discussion on Iranian nuclear program, I discussed Israeli threat perception to its interest and identity. Intra debates on military strike were also introduced. In the section of the prospect for international crisis between Iran and Israel, I argued that there is a possibility of Israeli risk taking to a military strike because of the enduring conflict between Israel and Iran.

**[Key words: Israel, Iranian nuclear program, enduring conflict]**



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