JHU/APL Seminar Series  
Rethinking US National Security Imperatives in a Time of Transition

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Apocalypse Now?: Iran's Nuclear Threat to Israel and What Can Be Done about It

Notes:  
Below are informal notes taken by a JHU/APL staff member at the Seminar.

Dr. David began by noting that his topic was a depressing one – the potential use of nuclear weapons by Iran on Israel. This would be the greatest threat to the existence of Israel. It would be a threat that would likely involve the US. The talk would be in eight parts:

- Why nuclear weapons pose such a threat to Israel
- Why Israel sees Iran as an especially dangerous threat
- Iran’s efforts to get nuclear weapons
- Arguments why a nuclearized Iran is NOT a threat to Israel and US interests and why a nuclearized Iran IS a threat to Israel and US interests
- What is being done and can be done to stop Iran
- What the US is doing and can do
- Where the US and Israel agree and disagree
- Personal predictions about what is likely to happen

Why nuclear weapons pose an existential threat to Israel

- Israel is a very small country – about the size of Maryland
- Nuclear weapons for the first time in history can use small packages to destroy cities  
  - Israel’s population is concentrated in only three cities (Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa)  
  - While Japan was big enough to survive the loss of two cities Israel would likely not survive as a state with the loss of Tel Aviv, Haifa
- In the past when adversaries have come close to developing nuclear weapons, Israel has eliminated their capabilities (Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007)  
  - These are the only cases of one country destroying the nuclear capability of another  
  - While building up its own nuclear capability, Israel is vigilant about preventing the buildup of others that might be adversaries.

Why Iran such a particular threat to Israel

- Iran’s leaders have called for a “world without Zion”  
  - Iran’s President Ahmadinejad has called for “wiping Israel off the map” and has denied that the Holocaust happened
Other leaders have called Israel a “cancerous tumor” in the region
Iran’s leaders claim that Israel is illegitimate and must be destroyed

- Iran supports:
  - Hamas and Hezbollah (which also call for wiping Israel off the map on their websites)
  - Terrorist actions worldwide against Israeli targets such as the Israeli center in Argentina
- Bottom line: it is clear what Iran’s intentions are

**Iran’s efforts to acquire nuclear weapons**

- Efforts began under the Shah but were modest – both supported and held back by the US
  - Shah wanted to do more but was overthrown before he could
- After the 1979 revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini at first said he had no interest in nuclear weapons
  - Chemical weapons use in the Iran-Iraq War changed his views
- Efforts accelerated in the 1990s and 2000s
- There are two possible paths to a nuclear weapon and to some extent Iran is trying both
  - Need fissile material – either plutonium or highly enriched uranium (HEU)
- Iran has made some modest efforts with plutonium
  - But supplies are under strong international controls
  - Iran’s work with heavy water reactors is still of concern as these produce plutonium
- Of most concern are Iranian efforts related to HEU
  - Uranium exists in the natural world but the isotope needed for bombs (uranium 235) exists in only minute quantities – about .7%
  - For a bomb need to concentrate/enrich uranium 235 to 90%
    - Not easy to do but there are several ways
    - Most common are centrifuges that spin uranium gas rapidly
      - Uranium 235 is a lighter and tends toward the center
      - Need thousands of centrifuges to gradually concentrate the U^{235}
    - Move slowly from .7%, to 1%, to 20% and eventually to 90% goal
- Iran is pursuing the thousands of centrifuges method to create HEU
  - Says they are getting to 3% and 20% – levels needed for power generation and research
  - Says their efforts are only for peaceful purposes
  - Plants in operation could develop enough HEU for several bombs a year
- Indications are that Iran is on the path to having a nuclear weapon in 1-5 years
- But, Iran could stop short and not assemble a weapon
  - Would be able to quickly go to that next step when it chooses to do so
  - As far as Israel is concerned, this would be the same as having a bomb
    - Iran already has many ways to deliver a nuclear weapon (bombers, cruise missiles, smuggling)
    - Could also use proxies to do the smuggling for them
- Bottom line: Iran, whose leaders who have threatened to do destroy Israel, are rapidly reaching the capability to do so

**Why a nuclearized Iran is NOT a threat to Israel and US interests**

- Realists in international relations see countries as pragmatic and assume that Iran’s leadership is “rational” and can be deterred.
  - They draw on Cold War experience and analysis
    - US and USSR did not launch nuclear weapons so why should any other rational government?
Deterrence held then and the Cold War ended

- Iran should behave similarly knowing that an attack on Israel would be suicidal
  - Would face massive retaliation by Israeli nuclear weapons
    - Knows Israel has 100 or 200 nuclear weapons
    - Knows it cannot take out Israel’s nuclear weapons in a first strike
      - Israel has well-protected land missiles, bombers, and submarine-launched cruise missiles built using German help
  - US already lives with nuclear-armed China, Russia, even N. Korea
    - So should be able to live with nuclearized Iran

- Iran is rational/pragmatic – sensitive to red lines it knows not to cross
  - Has not given chemical weapons to its proxies
  - Did nothing when Israel was battering the Hezbollah

- It is rational for Iran to have nuclear weapons – has enemies, not paranoid
  - Has not given chemical weapons to its proxies
  - Should not be considered alarming or threatening

- Nuclear weapons will not embolden Iran
  - Iran believes nuclear weapons are a defensive, not coercive weapon
  - Nuclear weapons are not good for compelling others to do what you want
  - Expect Iran to act the same way to Israel and its Gulf neighbors

- It is unclear whether Iran’s getting nuclear weapons would cause its neighbors to do so
  - Even if they did, it wouldn’t be a big problem
  - The spread of nuclear weapons might actually spread stability
    - No country will want to mess with a nuclear neighbor
    - Would mean less conflict and war

- Bottom line: Iran’s use of nuclear weapons would be deterred and it is not worth a war to stop them from getting them

Why a nuclearized Iran IS a threat to Israel and US interests

- Concepts go beyond realism and are messier involving more domestic politics and psychology

- To begin with, the Cold War is not a good model to look to when talking about Iran
  - Iran is not the same as the Soviet Union

- Iran’s leaders are often religious fanatics who “hate Jews more than they love life”
  - Many believe in a hidden Imam and are waiting for him to reappear to make things right
  - To speed this along, believe there is a need to create the apocalypse allowing the hidden Imam to appear
    - Ahmadinejad is known to believe in this
  - Contraindications:
    - Could say something similar about President Bush’s Christian beliefs
    - It takes a lot of people in Iran to launch a nuclear attack – not all might agree with this view
    - Bottom line – this aspect can’t be discounted but it is not persuasive

- Iran could pass nuclear weapons to their terrorist group proxies who would use them
  - Iran has given them 1000s of missile already
  - Not a big worry since not all leaders would go along with this
  - Iran knows that it would not avoid retaliation by allowing their proxies to carry out nuclear attacks

- Miscalculation concerns
In the Cold War there were many nearly nuclear crises even though there were relations between the sides and many built-in processes.

- Iran and Israel (and the US) have no decent communication process
  - Missteps could spiral out of control
- Iran and Israel both think a first strike will give them the advantage
- If Iranian leaders are more prone to taking risks, could cause attack miscalculations
  - Not a would-they or wouldn’t-they dichotomy – more of a continuum
  - May be rational but also driven by hatred of Jews, making Iran more prone to act in ways that others not so driven would avoid
- Iran might believe they could survive retaliation since it is a larger country
- Bottom line: history shows miscalculations happen – i.e., Saddam thought he could get away with grabbing Kuwait

- Accidents and unauthorized launch concerns
  - It is unclear how good Iran’s command and control is
    - Always want to be ready to launch an attack but don’t want nuclear weapons to be launched without authorization
  - Iran’s leadership worries about being attacked by an Israeli decapitating strike so they disperse both weapons and launch authority
    - Not all of those given authority may be as rational as the leaders
  - US had a history of accidents with nuclear weapons even though it had strenuous safeguards
    - Iranian technology may not be as good and could lead to accidents that are perceived as strikes
  - Bottom line: deterrence won’t help with these factors

- Biggest concern is if the Iranian regime begins to collapse
  - Protests are already going on, especially since Arab Spring activity arose in the region
  - Most of the population is pro-West but there are a few radical mullahs who might be non-rational actors
  - Iran’s leaders might be inclined to use nuclear weapons if their regime is under duress especially after witnessing what happened in Libya
    - Could use nuclear weapons on their own people or choose to take Israel down with them

- Iran could use its nuclear weapons to hold back international actions against them
  - Today’s Syrian situation would be even more complex if Syria had nuclear weapons

- Even if Iran did not use its nuclear weapons, having them could cause problems in the Mid East
  - Not clear whether it would push others in the region to get nuclear weapons
  - Can’t be sure that Iran would not act more aggressively in the region
  - Would US want others in the region (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, etc.) to have nuclear weapons – especially given general instability and number of terrorists there
  - The Gulf neighbors might feel the need to appease Iran

- Bottom line:
  - A nuclear-armed Iran might behave responsibly, have no accidents, not risk using nuclear weapons, and could be deterred, ...or not
  - All options are plausible: Iran might not be able to prevent unauthorized launches or chose to take down Israel as the regime collapses

The problem for Israel: Iran may be deterrable but how certain can they be: 80%? 90%?
How much are Israeli leaders willing to risk given these uncertainties?

Bottom line: a nuclear Iran is unacceptable to Israel

What is being done to stop a nuclear Iran

- Diplomatic efforts and negotiations are ongoing – have had 3 sets so far with US and international entities

- US/UN position can be summarized as *Stop, Shut, and Ship*
  - Stop enriching uranium any further
  - Shut down the facilities where that can be done
  - Ship out the uranium that is already at the 20% level

- There is talk of allowing Iran to keep 3.5% enriched uranium for power generation purposes and turn over all that has been enriched to 20%
  - Also want Iran to answer questions about its weaponization plans

- Iran is refusing these demands – wants to keep its 20% enriched uranium
  - Also wants the international sanctions to be ended

- It appears as though having inspectors involved is making the situation worse
  - August 2012 IAEA report says that Iran is now hiding its facilities and making inspections impossible

- Can see patterns of Iranian behavior: Talks followed by international hopes Iran will stop followed by more talks – all the while Iran keeps spinning its centrifuges

- Sanctions
  - Some hope that economic sanctions will work with Iran where it did not with N. Korea since Iran is more connected to the world
  - Not a full oil embargo since denied by China and Russia in UN Security Council – Europe is no longer buying oil from Iran, but others are
  - US is imposing economic sanctions involving banking
  - Results of the sanctions
    - Iranian currency value has dropped 50%
    - Oil exports are down by about half, costing Iran about $5 billion a month
  - May or may not work
    - Leaders may value work on nuclear weapons more highly than they are concerned about economic consequences
    - Iran does have some ways of getting around the sanctions such as increasing trade with China

What can be done?

Israel’s options

- Agree to a nuclear free zone including giving up their nuclear weapons
  - The concept: Israel is being hypocritical – they have nuclear weapons but believe no one else should
    - But Israel is not threatening anyone
  - Israel unlikely to go along with this
    - Might do it if a comprehensive peace was assured
  - Israel’s renouncing of nuclear weapons might not cause Iran to give up on their nuclear ambitions
    - Iran already said they would not, and they are still building in that direction
Bottom line: This might score debating points for Israel but that is hardly enough

- Israel could focus more on defense against missiles, air strikes and smuggling efforts
  - But even one leaker getting through would wreak havoc
  - Makes sense for Israel to do all these things but can’t rely solely on them for protection from Iran

- Efforts short of war
  - Assassination of Iranian scientists
    - Worked in the 1980s with German scientists in Egypt – after a few were killed all went home
    - Might not work because Iran can call on a larger indigenous population of scientists
  - Cyber options like Stuxnet and Flame
    - Computer worm destroyed centrifuges by making them whirl out of control while making operators think everything was normal
    - Such actions can’t do enough on their own
      - Iranians have found countermeasures to overcome cyber intrusions
    - Still may be worth doing for Israel
  - Other potentially helpful efforts are unlikely to solve the problem
    - US naval exercises in the region
    - New air defense radar systems in Qatar
    - More cyber intrusions

- Regime change
  - Helps that the population is generally pro-Western
  - Would be a good idea to have another government in Iran but would be hard to accomplish

- Conducting military attacks to destroy Iran’s nuclear facilities as was done in past instances
  - Unsure that it could succeed
  - Requires missiles, aircraft (F-15s and F-16s)
  - Four most important sites are more than 1,000 miles away from Israel
    - Requires long-distance refueling and overflying of hostile territory
    - Targets are hidden and hardened, often underground – not like the single location above ground facilities of the past
      - Many facilities would be in tunnels
    - Some facilities were built where significant civilian collateral damage could be expected
  - Israel’s capabilities are much leaner than those of the US
  - Iran would likely retaliate
    - Might try closing the Strait of Hormuz
      - Even the attempt would cause oil prices to rise dramatically
    - Could turn loose its terrorist organization proxies
  - Israel would expect censure from the rest of the world
    - Might drive a wedge between the US and Israel
  - In the end Iran could simply restart its program

**US position on Iran’s nuclearization and options**

- Wants to stop Iran from getting nuclear weapons
- Wants to stop Israel from attacking Iraq
• Does not want to attack Iran
  o Would be seen as the US attacking a Muslim country – again!
• Does not want to rely on trying to contain or deter a nuclear Iran
  o Stands with Israel on this point 100%
• US does have disagreements with Israel on several points
  o When to attack Iranian facilities – US would be more hesitant/cautious
  o US may want to see signs of weaponization before acting
    ▪ Intel analysts not convinced that Iran has made the decision to weaponize
  o Because the US has greater capabilities to attack facilities including those underground, it believes it has more time to make the attack decision
  o Israel wants to strike when it believes that Iran has the capability to weaponize
    ▪ Mitt Romney seems to agree more closely with the Israeli point of view
      (See the October Rethinking Seminar comparing the foreign relations views of the presidential candidates)
  o Israel is convinced that Iran is going nuclear
    ▪ US doubts are seen as wrong
    ▪ Israel believes because of its lesser capabilities it must attack earlier than the US would choose to do
  o Israel’s Defense Minister has talked about Iran’s zone of immunity
    ▪ There comes a point when the Iranians have so many centrifuges in invulnerable places that they can’t be stopped
    ▪ At that point Israel would need to rely on the US, but doesn’t want to get to that position
• Israel wants to identify red lines – when Iran crosses those lines they will be attacked
  o Obama Administration wants to give more time for sanctions and diplomacy to work
  o Israel believes that these non-military efforts won’t work
  o But even red lines aren’t enough for holding back the Iranians
    ▪ Iran has been given red lines at least 7 times
    ▪ Each time they have crossed those lines
  o US administrations had in the past said it would be unacceptable for N. Korea to go nuclear – but they did
• For the reasons cited above Israel wants to strike on its own
  o US fears that an Israeli strike would be ineffective and any Iranian response would be horrific
  o Israel believes it could handle the Iranian response
• US could get pulled in because of all its troops in the region
  o But the US might try to stay out of the conflict by telling Iran that it wasn’t them, it was only Israel acting out

Dr. David’s predictions about what will happen
• Israel will not strike Iran this year
  o The consequences would be too great
  o Will allow the sanctions to work a little longer
• Need to watch for an Iranian breakout
  o Will they start enriching uranium beyond the 20% level?
  o Will they not allow the IAEA inspectors in at all?
• Eventually, Israel may ask the US to strike Iran
Will say that if the US doesn’t, Israel will
- Hard to tell how long Israel would have after a breakout occurred – Months? Days?

- Short of a breakout, Israel will:
  - Allow Iran to continue advancing its nuclear program despite enormous risk
  - But not confident about this no-attack prediction

- Political scientists (especially realists) treat all countries the same – expect them to behave the same, so expect Israel to do as US did – let others go nuclear but...
  - Israel is a Jewish state informed by history – particularly of the Holocaust
  - Difference today is that this Jewish state does have a competent military force
  - Will be hard to ask Israel to standby while Iran builds an existential threat when the Israelis believe they have the means to stop it

- Israel might allow Iran to go nuclear or get very close or it might attack
- If Israel chooses to attack, Dr. David could not join in the resulting worldwide chorus of condemnation

QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION

RE: Public Opinion in Iran
Public opinion can be significantly different from that of a small number of radical mullahs
- In general there is a feeling that Iran has been held down by the West
  - Not completely wrong when look at history
- Many see having nuclear weapons as a sovereign right – the world can’t stop them
  - Some are less fervent than others on the subject
  - Presume some who could come to power are likely less willing to risk their economy to acquire nuclear weapons
  - Some agreement could be reached especially if some level of enrichment is permitted for power generating purposes
- Concerns about Iran’s cheating would be lessened if a different government was in charge
- A lot of the concern relates not just to capabilities but to intentions
  - Current leaders with their poisonous rhetoric and religious fervor make the issues that much more frightening

RE: Russia’s Views on Iran
Russia, as usual, is not has helpful as the US would wish because Russia
- Has a billion dollar nuclear reactor deal with Iran – it has lots of built-in safeguards
- Also likes to have influence in the Gulf region
- Would probably prefer a non-nuclear Iran but won’t work against Iran to stop development
  - It has been a little better about this lately
- Worries about an Israeli strike
- Must walk a fine line since it also doesn’t want to appear to be a tool of the US

RE: Iranian Views of World Opinion
Sometimes Iranians will couch their rhetoric in different ways to sound less threatening
- What we said was mistranslated
- We just want to get rid of the leadership of Israel, not the people
- Some things are said to gain support from neighbors in the Arab world
• Never a good idea for one UN member to threaten the destruction of another
  o But UN still willing to hold meetings in Iran
• Some would say that any use of force is wrong
• Others would say that the world would get over the death of Israel
• Bottom line: Iran is not all that worried about world opinion

RE: Iranian Allies and Clients – Syria and Hezbollah
Syria is Iran’s closest ally
• If the current Syrian regime is replaced by a Sunni government, it would be bad news for Iran
  o Could be bad for the US, too – hard to tell which ways things would go
  o Could be different situations in the short term vs. the long term
• Would Hezbollah turn against the US? Already has – Beirut barracks attack
  o If the US sides with Israel, does that cause even more attacks on the US?
    ▪ Possibly, but unclear
    ▪ Should not allow this sort of consideration to influence US policies

RE: Gulf States Reactions to an Israeli Attack
First they would bitterly condemn Israeli actions, but then would be privately happy at Shai Iran’s losses
• Iran is actually a bigger threat to Saudi Arabia than is Israel
• Saudis don’t want
  o Terrorists operating in the region
  o Groups fomenting unrest nearby
• There is some speculation that the Saudis told Israel that if they had to attack Iran, that they could go through Saudi air space without worrying about Saudi air defense radars
• Sunnis consider Iran a great threat and would probably be happier than anyone else if Israel handled the problem for them

RE: Iran’s Real Agenda
It is not clear how or whether a nuclear Iran would be a greater regional threat
• Having nuclear weapons would be seen as a shield against attacks from the US
  o Would make others fear that the US would not come to their aid
• Iran used to be balanced by Iraq in the region – even when Israel is considered
• It is possible that if Israel did not exist, there might be a larger Sunni / Shia conflict

RE: President Obama and Israel
President has not behaved wrongly with Israel, but is not known for getting along with Israeli leaders
• That Israel is still colonizing the West Bank with settlements does not help the peace efforts
• Obama told Israel that the US expects them to do what they agreed to in the 1967 agreements
  o All previous presidents have said the same thing
• Some adversaries look for an daylight between the allies as an opportunity to pull them apart
  o Should always expect differences between the US and Israel given the complexities

RE: A Preemptive Nuclear Strike
First use of nuclear weapons is a monumental move
• It would help if the situation was clearly preemptive – not just preventative
  o Example: If Israel had strong indications and warnings that Iran was about to carry out a
nuclear attack

- If only preventative, situation would not reach the level needed to get across that first use threshold