

Israel and Iranian threat

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It has been an axiom for analysts and observers to posit that the Israelis are obsessed with the issue of security. The history of the Jews in Europe before the advent of Zionism and the century-old conflict with the Arabs has left a deep imprint on the way Israelis view their security. Such a unique experience created what could be termed a Jewish prism. According to this prism, Israelis make a distinction between a Jew and a gentile. The latter cannot be trusted and is somewhat hostile. By and large, Israelis are destined to see challenges through this prism which, as Michael Brecher contends, pervades thought, feeling, belief and behaviour in the political realm.

Therefore, regardless of the objective reality of the Israeli strategic environment, this prism accentuates the sense of insecurity. For this reason, Israelis attach great importance to the concept of power as the ultimate guarantee to the security and survival of the state. This might partially explain why Israeli leaders relegated peace to the national agenda over the last six years.

The argument that peace will lead to security is not taken seriously by a majority of Israelis. The belief is still that even in the era of peace, power will have the final say in the regional interaction. Shimon Peres' idea of a new, peaceful, Middle East, which is incumbent upon economic integration, was defeated in Israel.

Of all security aspects, the issue of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) remains a key concern to Israeli strategists. Fears of a fatal attack with WMD are beefed up by the fact that some "rogue" states, such as Iran, have been developing a credible delivery system. Tel Aviv is now within the range of these rather deadly weapons. Thus, Israeli leaders believe that they have good reason to worry. Indeed, there has been no diplo-

matic relationship between Israel and Iran ever since the Islamic revolution took off in 1979. That Iran shores up the Lebanese militant group Hizbollah has only added salt to the wound. To many Israelis, Iran was waging war by proxy in South Lebanon.

Whilst it is true that the perception of threat is considerable, Israelis feel incapable of carrying out a preemptive military attack as they did with Iraq in 1991

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when the Israeli air force wiped out the Osirak nuclear reactor, thus retarding the Iraqi effort to nuclearise for years. In the Iranian case, nuclear facilities are scattered throughout the country.

Although Israel has strategic coordination with Turkey, that allows the former to use the airspace of the latter, a preemptive attack will run the risk of failure and, worse, will probably not go unchecked. For this reason, Ehud Barak announced in 1994 that the threat of WMD should be dealt with on a global level and that Israel cannot repeat its adventure in Iraq.

It should be emphasised that the Israelis are watchful. So every now and then, an article will appear in the Hebrew press regarding the threat from Iranian ambitious quest to acquire nuclear weapons. A prominent ex-army general and politician, Moshe Arens, wrote in Haaretz last week, warning that the

Iranian threat is real while concurrently expressing his pleasure that the United States is serious about this "intolerable" Iranian ambition and, furthermore, that the student demonstrations might create a new dynamic within Iran that would favour Israel.

With the demise of the perceived Iraqi threat and the subsequent amelioration of Israel's strategic environment, one expects Israel to capitalise on the situation and do something akin to what Rabin did in 1993. Rabin reached the conclusion that

the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the defeat of Iraq created a window of opportunity to solve the long-standing Arab-Israeli conflict. Driven by this assumption, he successfully signed the Oslo accords and the peace treaty with Jordan.

The same scenario could still happen, but paradoxically, this seems slow in coming. There is barely an Israeli leader who is capable of repeating Rabin's feat. Yet, the insistence on total victory and pro-

crastination tactics have the potential of creating the thinking that the problem will only be resolved by the massive use of force. Seen this way, the Iranian influence will be enhanced.

The argument that the American presence in Iraq will take care of the Iranian threat is true, but only in the short-term. Moreover, if the Iranian radicals remain predominant, they can always find allies in our region who are willing to continue the fight against the Israeli occupation. Now, with the advanced know-how, Iranians can smuggle light weapons with very destructive capabilities.

To sum up, I believe that although power is important for safeguarding a state's survival and security, genuine peace is still the only method that can lessen the motive to fight and stave off any imprudent action.