

## **An analysis of Israeli perspectives on Iran**

Written evidence submitted by BICOM to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee inquiry on 'UK Policy Towards Iran'

**January 2014**

### **Executive Summary**

1. Israel considers Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons an intolerable threat and deterrence or containment of a nuclear armed Iran, or an Iran on the threshold of nuclear weapons, are not considered acceptable policy options.
2. Israel's concern is not only that a radical theocratic regime, ideologically committed to its destruction, might actually use such weapons against it, but that Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons would bolster its threatening regional agenda.
3. Israel's goal is for Iran's nuclear capability to be rolled back to the point where it does not have the capacity to produce the fissile material for a nuclear weapon.
4. Failure to reach a deal which sets Iran sufficiently back from breakout capacity will leave Israeli policy makers with the dilemma of whether or not to take unilateral military action, a possibility that must be taken seriously.
5. Both a nuclear armed Iran, and any potential Israeli military strike, carry the risk of destabilisation, with attendant risks for British strategic and economic interests. Curtailing these threats requires a comprehensive diplomatic solution that pushes Iran decisively back from the nuclear threshold.

### **About BICOM**

6. BICOM is an independent British organisation dedicated to creating a better understanding of Israel in the UK, and promoting a close relationship between Britain and Israel, based on shared values and interests.
7. BICOM provides expert analysis and news summary as well as in-depth research on events in Israel and the region through our online publications. We take opinion formers and policymakers to Israel and the Palestinian Territories to learn about the issues, and bring experts from the region to Britain. We promote a balanced discourse about Israel in the British media.
8. BICOM has a research team in London and Jerusalem specialising in Israeli politics, the peace process, Israel's place in the region and the UK-Israel relationship.
9. Leading members of our research team have written widely on the issue of Israeli policy towards Iran, including Senior Visiting Fellow Brig. Gen. (res.) Michael Herzog, Director of Research Dr. Toby Greene, and Senior Research Fellow Professor Alan Johnson.

## **The scope of this submission**

10. This submission aims to address the issue of “Iran’s foreign policy, how the UK should engage with it, and the consequences for other countries in the region of Iran and the EU3+3 reaching, or failing to reach, a nuclear deal.” In particular it analyses how Iran’s nuclear programme and other foreign policies are viewed by Israeli policy makers, and the implications of the Israeli position for British interests.

## **How Iran’s nuclear programme is viewed in Israel**

11. There is near consensus in Israel that Iran’s nuclear programme is intended to provide the capacity to produce nuclear weapons, and that this poses an immediate and unacceptable national security threat. Many, including Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, believe this to be the primary security threat to the State of Israel, and an existential one. Iran already has missiles capable of reaching Israel. If Iran acquired nuclear warheads for these missiles, Israel would be in the shadow of a power which openly called for its destruction, and would have the theoretical capacity to carry it out.
12. Iran is ideologically opposed to Israel’s existence. Statements calling for Israel’s demise are commonplace. The 2005 statement of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that Israel “must be erased from the page of time” (translated by the *New York Times* as “must be wiped off the map”) was consistent with a pattern of regime rhetoric. In a televised speech made on 20 November 2013, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei said, “Zionist officials cannot be called humans, they are like animals,” adding, “The Israeli regime is doomed to failure and annihilation.” President Rouhani has likened Israel to a cancer in writings and speeches.<sup>1</sup> Israel’s perception of these threats is coloured by its history. Deeply rooted in Israeli political culture is the principle that the Jewish people should never again face a genocidal threat, and that such threats should be pre-empted.
13. Israel’s view is also affected by its geostrategic vulnerability. Any possibility of an Iranian nuclear strike constitutes an unbearable threat, given the damage expectation. As a small country with its urban centres and industry highly concentrated, much of Israel’s population and economic capacity could be devastated by a single nuclear strike. The risk Israelis perceive is of an Iranian belief in a “winnable nuclear war”, because of Israel’s vulnerability - a concept at odds with the Cold War deterrent theory of Mutually Assured Destruction. In this context, Israelis often refer to a speech made by former Iranian President Rafsanjani in December 2001, in which he said, “The use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything. However, it will only harm the Islamic world. It is not irrational to contemplate such an eventuality.”

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Ditto, “Reading Rouhani: The Promise and Peril of Iran’s New President,” Policy Focus 129, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 2013.

14. Israeli analysts further debate whether Iran can even be relied upon to make rational calculations about the use of a nuclear weapon against Israel, and whether they would be deterred by Israel's own presumed nuclear capabilities. Some argue that Iran would act rationally, and not use nuclear weapons against Israel. Others regard Iran as driven by a religious fervour, making it irrational. For Israelis, the cost of a mistaken assessment on this question is intolerable.
15. Israelis also consider the possibility that Iran may seek a way, in years to come, perhaps through proxies, to use a nuclear device in a deniable manner. Furthermore, if Iran acquired nuclear weapons there would be the chance of nuclear crises born out of miscalculation. This risk would be exacerbated by the hostility between Iran and Israel, the Israeli perception of an existential threat, and the lack of any direct communication channels.
16. Policy makers in Israel also fear that a nuclear-armed Iran would trigger a nuclear arms race in the region. Saudi Arabia, Turkey or even Egypt, could seek to counter-balance the threat with their own nuclear capabilities. A poly-nuclear Middle East would be even more dangerous and prone to crises.

#### **Iran's nuclear programme and its regional agenda**

17. Israelis assume that even if Iran would not use nuclear weapons against Israel, an Iranian nuclear weapon would further embolden the regime in the violent actions they already take against Israel, and their support for armed groups on Israel's borders.
18. Iran supplies Hezbollah's arsenal of over 60,000 rockets, as well as more advanced weapons. Hezbollah fired 4000 rockets at Israel during the 2006 Second Lebanon War, killing 44 civilians, injuring more than 1400, and temporarily displacing many tens of thousands from their homes. Some 119 Israeli soldiers were killed in the conflict. Iran also has a long history of providing arms, finance and training to Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other Palestinian armed groups. Hundreds of rockets fired at Israel from the Gaza Strip were supplied by Iran. Iran could use nuclear threats in order to deter Israel from taking conventional military action against Iranian terrorist proxies. The possibility of the West Bank becoming another base for Iranian backed terror is a major concern when it comes to the question of ceding territory to the Palestinians.
19. Iran and its allies also strike at Israeli and Jewish targets internationally. In 2012, Iranian agents were believed to have been responsible for attacks on Israeli diplomats in Georgia, Thailand and India. Iranian client Hezbollah was responsible for a bombing in Bulgaria in July 2012, killing five Israeli tourists and their Bulgarian driver.
20. Under the newly acquired umbrella of nuclear deterrence, Israeli policy makers expect that Iran would further escalate its existing destabilising power-projection. This would include threatening Israel and moderate Arab regimes; undermining any peace process; backing proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere; manipulating energy markets and posing as guardians of certain Muslim communities even beyond the Middle East.

## Israel's policy

21. Given these threats, the consensus in Israeli policy circles is that Iran must be prevented from acquiring nuclear weapons, and containment and deterrence are not acceptable options. Israel's primary focus is on preventing Iran acquiring the fissile material for a nuclear weapon, or having the means to acquire it at short notice. The clear and consistent position of Prime Minister Netanyahu is that all uranium enrichment should stop, stockpiles of enriched uranium should be removed, the facility at Qom and the advanced centrifuges in Natanz be dismantled, and that work cease at the Arak heavy water reactor.
22. Israel argues that all of these facilities were developed illegally and in secret. They are unnecessary for Iran's civil nuclear power programme, and are operated in contravention of binding UN Security Council resolutions. It is further argued that given Iran's long record of deception and the IAEAs detailed evidence of Iran's secret weaponisation research, Iran cannot be trusted with these capabilities.
23. Some Israeli security figures have voiced the opinion that under strict limitations and close monitoring, some enrichment within Iran could be tolerated, if it were capped at 3.5 per cent and the stockpile kept below that required for one bomb. They argue that what is most critical for Israel is that Iran should be years away from acquiring fissile material for a single bomb, rather than weeks or months as is currently the case.
24. Israel has worked to prevent Iran reaching breakout capacity on several tracks. First, it has campaigned for crippling sanctions to force Iran to reverse its policies. Second, it is widely believed to have acted to disrupt the programme through covert means. Third, it has made preparations for a direct military strike on Iranian nuclear facilities as a last resort.
25. Most Israeli policy makers agree that the military option must be available, and that a credible military threat makes it more likely that Iran will accept a diplomatic agreement, as well as focusing the minds of Western policy makers. However, the circumstances under which Israel should consider using this option, and particularly whether it should consider acting without US coordination, is considered to be one of the most difficult policy dilemmas in the country's history.
26. Israel has twice acted directly to prevent other states acquiring nuclear weapons. Israel destroyed Iraq's Osirak reactor in 1981 and, in an operation that has never been formally acknowledged, destroyed a secret Syrian reactor in 2007. However, a strike against Iran's facilities would involve far greater technical challenges, due to the long distances, the hardened nature of the targets, and the multiple sites involved. There are also greater risks of retaliation, with Iran's allies on Israel's borders likely to retaliate, potentially triggering a multi-front war. Iran also has a history of retaliating against Jewish and Israeli targets around the world. This is in addition to the potential diplomatic backlash Israel may face. For all these reasons, Israel would rather see the issue resolved diplomatically, and if military action were necessary, for the US to take the lead.

27. However, there is a lack of confidence in Israel that the US and its allies, including the UK, would take military action if other means fail. This impression was enhanced by the hesitation shown by the US and UK to take military action against Syria, after the Assad regime crossed the US 'red line' on chemical weapons.
28. There are credible reports of at least two occasions since 2010 when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was making preparations to order a military strike. Most recently in the summer of 2012, when Iran was approaching the point when it would have enough 20 per cent enriched uranium for one bomb, the debate spilled into the public domain in Israel, with serving and former security officials taking positions on both sides. The moment was diffused when Iran reduced its stockpile of 20 per cent enriched uranium. Overall, the possibility of Israel taking military action should diplomacy fail, and should other parties prove unwilling, must be taken extremely seriously.

### **Israel's view of the current diplomacy**

29. Israeli analysts debate the intentions of President Rouhani, but many view his diplomatic outreach to the West with great scepticism. They point out that Rouhani is a regime insider who was chief nuclear negotiator from 2003 to 2005. During this time Iran agreed a temporary suspension of enrichment and reprocessing, but made progress in other areas, which it then capitalised on when it abandoned the agreements in 2005.
30. In his 2011 memoir Rouhani wrote, "To those who have questions in their minds about the reasons for accepting the temporary, voluntary suspension of some of the nuclear activities ... the accomplishments included the completion of the Isfahan uranium conversion facility; the assembly and construction of centrifuges; the Arak heavy-water reactor; continued activity for building a 40-megawatt reactor; the completion of the Natanz underground facility; the production of yellowcake; and the building of the P2 centrifuge."<sup>2</sup>
31. There is also a keen awareness in Israel that the President answers to the Supreme Leader and that Rouhani's election, and Iran's engagement in diplomacy, is motivated to relieve pressure on the Iranian economy brought about by sanctions.
32. It is notable in this respect that there is little sign of change in Iran's regional policies, including support for Assad in Syria and Hezbollah. Also, whilst Rouhani raised the issue of human rights during his campaign, since his election, domestic human rights abuses have continued. Leading reformist politicians Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi remain under house arrest and executions - sometimes in public - of convicted criminals continue. In December 2013 the regime executed four members of the Arab Abhazi minority on the vaguest of charges.

### **Israeli concerns with the Joint Plan of Action**

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<sup>2</sup> Ditto, "Reading Rouhani".

33. Israeli officials have many objections to the Joint Plan of Action (JPA) agreed by the EU3+3 and Iran, and there was disappointment that France was apparently left alone amongst Western powers in working to strengthen the deal.
34. The central concern is that the pressure of sanctions, which took years to build up, has been relieved, potentially creating an economically sustainable situation for Iran. Aside from the release of much needed funds, and relaxation on trade sanctions, Israeli officials argue that the positive psychological effect injects confidence into Iran's economy and encourages investors to return. The agreement means an inevitable loss of momentum in developing new sanctions. Meanwhile Iran has methods to evade and adapt to sanctions, meaning that they require constant monitoring, enforcement and updating to maintain their current level of impact.<sup>3</sup>
35. Israelis point out that in return, Iran has not had to meet any of its obligations under UN Security Council resolutions. Whilst Iran agreed to remove its 20 per cent enriched uranium, it has not had to halt enrichment, dismantle any infrastructure, or take any step which is not immediately reversible. One Israeli official likened the deal to taking the bullets away from a convicted criminal, but allowing him to keep the gun.
36. Israeli officials stress that freezing enrichment up to 20 per cent and removing 20 per cent enriched uranium is of reduced significance now Iran has advanced IR-2 centrifuges which would accelerate its capacity to breakout with uranium enriched to 3.5 per cent.
37. Furthermore Israelis object that the agreement legitimises both uranium enrichment and the building of a reactor at Arak, despite UN Security Council resolutions demanding these activities stop. The Arak reactor is unnecessary for Iran's civil needs, whilst being highly suitable for the production of weapons grade plutonium.<sup>4</sup>
38. Iran is also allowed to preserve its seven tonnes of low enriched uranium (LEU). Although the agreement requires Iran to convert additional LEU to oxide, this conversion is conditional upon Iran's operational readiness for conversion. Israelis express the concern that Iran may drag its feet in this process and continue to accumulate LEU.
39. The agreement also allows Iran to advance on other fronts. It explicitly allows research and development on advanced centrifuges, which could eventually give Iran the ability to breakout faster with fewer centrifuges, and in a smaller facility. It also fails to prohibit work with uranium metal (part of the process for creating the bomb core), and Iran could pursue this technology under the guise of other purposes, such as developing depleted uranium shells.
40. The JPA also glosses over the IAEA's long standing concerns about the military dimensions of Iran's programme, saying only that a "Joint Commission will work with the IAEA to facilitate resolution of past and present issues of concern," with no details about implementation.

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<sup>3</sup> Emanuele Ottolenghi, "Iran Is \*Really\* Good at Evading Sanctions," *The Tower*, September 2013.

<sup>4</sup> David Albright and Christina Walrond, "Update on the Arak Reactor," *ISIS*, July 15, 2013

41. Another source of concern is the considerable vagaries over timelines, with the deal “renewable by mutual consent” and with no clear end point. Israelis fear an open-ended process with no clear outcome, which is a cover for Iranian progress towards ever shortening breakout times.

#### **Conclusions and implications for British interests**

42. The JPA has increased Israeli doubts about Western resolve, and increased fears that the EU3+3 will tolerate Iran on the threshold of nuclear breakout capacity – a situation considered too risky by Israel.
43. Failure to secure a comprehensive deal which decisively pushes Iran back from breakout capacity, and failure by the US and its Western allies to present a credible military threat, will increase the possibility of Israeli unilateral military action. Many Israeli policy makers, including Prime Minister Netanyahu, assess that as a last resort, the threat of Iran acquiring nuclear arms would justify the risks of military action.
44. Failure to stop Iran acquiring nuclear weapons would strengthen Tehran’s regional strategy, including its attempts to dominate its Arab neighbours, undermine Israeli security and inhibit the peace process by empowering spoilers.
45. The increased instability likely to be brought about by a nuclear standoff between Iran and Israel, or the development of a poly-nuclear Middle East, would directly impact British security and economic interests through the resultant instability.
46. Both a nuclear armed Iran, and any potential Israeli military strike, carry the risk of destabilisation, with attendant risks for British strategic and economic interests. Curtailing these threats requires a comprehensive diplomatic solution that pushes Iran decisively back from the nuclear threshold.