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## Iran Goes Nuclear:

### *An Analysis of the Bushehr Nuclear Plant and Israeli-Palestinian Peace Talks*

by Renanah Miles

Iran won't swerve first and Russia will do as Russia pleases are, perhaps, the intended takeaways from Sunday's ceremony opening the Bushehr nuclear power plant. The event itself was uncharacteristically subdued, factual, just one more tick on the clock counting down to Iran going nuclear. But in light of Bushehr, it's a very different announcement made two days prior that is most worth considering: Resumption of the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks next month. Progress in the talks is critical to buying Israel, America and wary Arab states strategic room to maneuver with Iran.

With impeccable timing, the news preempted the spotlight from Bushehr, and will likely do so again in September. The planned start date for the talks – September 2 – is purportedly linked to the expiration date of the Israeli settlement freeze in the West Bank at the end of September, an incendiary issue that if resumed would likely burn bridges to negotiation yet again. If talks start on time though, it will handily refocus attention off another Iranian milestone the same weekend – Bushehr is scheduled to become operational Sunday, September 5.

That Iran's march forward puts its interests on a collision course with regional and Western interests is hardly disputable. Israel's stakes are perhaps the highest, and its room to maneuver the most constrained. A substantial concern echoed in various war games and Iran-strike scenarios, is an Israeli strike that draws an off-guard America in to a high-risk situation it is ill prepared for. A war game organized out of the Saban Center at Brookings last December observed that, "An Israeli leadership faced with a strategic situation toward Iran it finds unacceptable might opt to launch a strike simply to 'shake-up' the strategic situation, the hope that doing so would force Washington to take actions that it otherwise would not."<sup>1</sup>

Regardless of the likelihood of an Israeli strike, any military option must fall into one of three basic frameworks – an Israeli-led, American-led or Arab-led strike. An Israeli-led strike would likely draw U.S. forces into the fray and scenarios where American and Arab forces cooperate, or Arab states give tacit approval to an Israeli strike, are plausible, but one of the three forces would lead the initiative, regardless of execution. The Israel-Palestine issue bears directly on the political viability of any of those options.

The peace talks – and a tenable solution, even if only partial – are needed to remove the high-visibility roadblock to cooperation that the Palestinian problem poses. Israel, America and Arab governments banded against Iranian aspirations need successful talks to aid in the region's

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack, "Osiraq Redux: A Crisis Simulation of an Israeli Strike on the Iranian Nuclear Program," *Middle East Memo Number 15*. For the full report, see [http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2010/02\\_iran\\_israel\\_strike\\_pollack.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2010/02_iran_israel_strike_pollack.aspx).

battle for perception. And, specific to any Israeli option, concessions made through talks offer a way to mitigate Israel's unique deterrent dilemma.

### ***Roadblock to Consensus***

The Palestinian problem is a regional problem. It is – ironically – both a rallying symbol around which Arab regimes attempt to connect with their discontented and otherwise disaffected or neglected populaces and a point by which sub-state groups marshal support from the same populaces against Israel, America and unpopular Arab regime governments. It is a deeply divisive political issue and an effective barrier to most overt Middle Eastern cooperation with Israel. Various scenarios of a unilateral Israeli strike on Iran come back to logistical dilemmas that would require, at a minimum, tacit Arab approval. Minimizing or reducing the roadblock to consensus would allow more strategic leeway for actions against Iran. For example, talks that led to an acceptable solution would provide the Saudi royals with plausible justification for cooperating with, or at least turning a blind eye to, an Israeli strike that traversed its air space.

### ***The Information Element***

The Israel-Palestine issue is an important element to the information war across the region. Public perception bears on the political viability and degree of backlash that would follow any course of action against Iran. Whether it's Israel ceding the messaging terrain to Hezbollah or the ongoing U.S. struggle to out-communicate the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the Afghan and Iraq theaters of operation, this issue has rippling effects. With specific ramifications for an Israeli-led strike is Israel's serious problem with the battle for public opinion and the "narrative" that inevitably evolves around asymmetric, low-end warfare. Hezbollah (and Hamas inasmuch as it follows the Hezbollah model) has impressive control of the information sphere.<sup>2</sup> The likelihood of Hezbollah and Hamas retaliation in event of a strike on Iran makes separating insurgents from the population by winning Israel's battle for the narrative an imperative, with direct implications for Israel's deterrent dilemma. But this is a battle that Israel is unlikely to win among its neighbors without some resolution to the Palestinian question.

### ***Israel's Deterrent Dilemma***

Impacting Israel's strategic options specifically is a two-fold deterrent dilemma. Each Iranian advance undermines Israel's nuclear deterrent – and could render it irrelevant unless Israel develops a second strike capability in time. Meanwhile, along its immediate borders, Israel's traditional "iron-wall" conventional deterrent<sup>3</sup> has run into increasing challenges confronting unconventional threats. Nearby threats posed by Iranian proxies – Hamas to the south and Hezbollah to the north – would spring into action in event of an Israeli-initiated strike on Iran. Israel has not been able to eradicate either group, making containment the only immediately viable option. But marginalizing Hamas does no good without a legitimate alternative governance body. A working relationship with a Mahmoud Abbas-led government

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<sup>2</sup> In the 2006 conflict, Hezbollah beat Israel soundly in the information battle. For a good overview of Israel's information operations efforts, see William B. Caldwell IV, Dennis M. Murphy, and Anton Menning, "Learning to Leverage New Media," *Military Review* (May-June 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Jabotinsky, an influential Zionist strategist, first called for an "iron wall" of military power to ensure the state's survival. The iron wall of Israel's military power smashed through the Arab forces quite effectively until the inevitable adaptation and resort to asymmetric tactics that ushered in the rise of sub-state and guerrilla actors post-1973.

based out of the West Bank, or even restored to power in Gaza, is essential to an effective containment strategy.

Progress on the Israel-Palestine issue won't end fundamental tensions over Israel's existence in the region. But progress will go a long way in buying breathing room for all parties with a stake in deterring Iran's nuclear program to figure out what's coming after Bushehr.

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