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# Israel and Iran

## A Dangerous Rivalry

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The research described in this report was conducted within the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community under Contract W74V8H-06-C-0002.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data** is available for this publication.

ISBN: 978-0-8330-5860-7

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Published 2011 by the RAND Corporation

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# Summary

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## Key Findings

### **The Israeli-Iranian Rivalry Could Lead to Direct Military Conflict**

Once de facto allies, Iran and Israel now view each other as rivals for power and influence in the region. The Iranian regime views Israel as a regional competitor bent on undermining its revolutionary system; Israel sees Iran as its predominant security challenge posing grave strategic and ideological challenges to the Jewish state. Israeli concerns that the Arab uprisings may benefit Iran and enhance its regional influence have only deepened Israeli alarm, even if the reality of enhanced Iranian influence may be questionable.

The emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran in the future could increase the prospects for direct armed conflict between the two nations. Israel might choose to preemptively strike Iranian nuclear facilities in an effort to thwart or delay such a development. A nuclear-armed Iran may view Israel as its primary regional competitor and could demonstrate its nuclear capability in the event of an armed conflict. Even if Iran has no intention to use nuclear weapons against Israel, the possibilities of miscalculation as regional crises escalate are high. The lack of direct communication between the two countries could potentially lead to misinterpreted signals and confusion regarding each actor's intentions and red lines. Even those who are optimistic about the ability of Israel and Iran to create a stable nuclear deterrence relationship may recognize that developing and stabilizing such a relationship is going to take time. Arguably, this transition period could be particularly dangerous.

### **Despite the Current Animosity, Israel and Iran Have Not Always Been Rivals**

Israel and Iran are not natural competitors and are not destined for perpetual conflict. Indeed, these two regional powers do not have territorial disputes nor do they compete economically. Each country has traditionally maintained distinct regional zones of interest (the Levant for Israel and the Persian Gulf for Iran). Arab governments regard each with great suspicion.

Relations between the two nations were often based on shared geopolitical interests, leading to years of cooperation both before and after Iran's 1979 revolution. Iran's last monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, viewed a *de facto* alliance with Israel as a counterweight to Iran's Arab neighbors. Tacit Iranian cooperation with Israel continued even after the Shah's fall in 1979. Both the Iranian regime and Israel saw Saddam Hussein's Iraq as the greatest obstacle to their respective national security interests. Iran desperately needed modern weaponry; Israel clung to the old periphery doctrine, which maintained that non-Arab states such as Iran could counter Israel's most committed foes.

Some post-revolutionary Iranian leaders also pursued more pragmatic policies toward Israel. This was particularly the case under the presidencies of Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997) and Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005). The two aimed to reform Iran's moribund economic, social, and political system by lessening its international isolation, leading to hints of easing of tensions with Israel. But these efforts were met with the resistance of reactionary figures within Iran with nonnegotiable views of Israel, and Israeli leaders largely ignored such gestures from Iranian reformists.

### **Only in the Last Decade Have Israel and Iran Come to View Each Other as Direct Rivals**

As late as the 1990s, Israel's security establishment did not consider Iran as its predominant security challenge. Yet today, Israelis view nearly every regional threat through the prism of Iran. Israel's threat perceptions of Iran stem in part from expanding Iranian missile capabilities and nuclear advances. But just as critical is Israel's view that Iranian regional influence is on the rise, infringing on core Israeli interests and

threatening stability in areas bordering Israel. Israeli leaders worry that if Iran acquired a nuclear weapons capability, its influence would only increase, severely limiting both Israeli and U.S. military and political maneuverability in the region.

The rise of Iranian principlists (fundamentalists) has also increased Iranian hostility toward and threat perceptions of Israel. This is due to the evolving nature of Iran's political system, including the rise of the Revolutionary Guards and the principlists under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005– ). The current configuration of the regime has produced an intense ideological hostility not seen since the early days of the revolution.

Moreover, the Middle East's geopolitical transformation over the last decade has intensified the rivalry. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 eliminated a common adversary of both Israel and Iran. Iran began to see itself as the Middle East's ascendant power, a view shared by many of Israel's political and military elite. Other events such as the 2006 war between Hizballah and Israel—in which Iranian tactics and arms were seen as effective against Israel—reinforced the viewpoint of Iran as the region's great power.

The Arab uprisings of 2011 have further fed Israeli concerns, although that turmoil has also created some new vulnerabilities and limitations for Iranian influence. The new regional landscape has enhanced Israeli fears of continued Iranian penetration into contested arenas close to home (particularly Gaza and Lebanon) and Iranian perceptions of the United States as a declining power.

### **Rifts Are Emerging Within Israel's Strategic Community About the Value of a Military Strike Option**

Differing cost-benefit assessments of a military strike option against Iran exist among both Israeli officials and security analysts. Those arguing in favor of this option believe that the political and military consequences of such a strike may be exaggerated and that even a delay in Iran's program would justify an attack if the alternative is a nuclear-armed Iran. Those arguing against a military strike believe that it could lead to a wider regional war without effectively halting the Iranian program. Divisions within Israel's strategic community on Iran policy cut

across party lines and government institutions, residing largely with individual personalities. Israeli views on the effectiveness of sanctions and sabotage efforts as well as the U.S. position could affect these internal debates.

Looking to the future, if Iran acquires nuclear weapons, and particularly if it assumes an overt posture, Israel may reassess its own nuclear posture of ambiguity. Israel may also seek additional security assurances from the United States, although it may be reluctant to forge a formal security pact because that may undermine the credibility of its own deterrence and limit its military and diplomatic freedom of action.

### **The Emergence of a New Regime in Iran Could Reshape the Rivalry**

A different set of Iranian leaders with less hostile views of Israel could diminish the rivalry between the two nations. The political and economic interests of reformists and pragmatic conservatives could lead to a lessening of tensions if these groups were to gain power in the future. The potential emergence of a secular democratic Iran may entirely obviate the need for a continued rivalry with Israel. Conversely, the complete militarization of Iranian politics under the Revolutionary Guards could lead to a heightening of tensions and Iranian adventurism.

## **Policy Recommendations**

The United States can help manage the Israeli-Iranian rivalry by pursuing policies that seek to avoid a direct military conflict between the two nations. It can do so by continuing policies focused on prevention and preparation. In the case of Israel, this means discouraging an Israeli military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities while bolstering Israeli capabilities in preparation for a future where Iran has managed to acquire nuclear weapons. For Iran, this suggests, first, continuing policies to dissuade the Iranian regime from weaponizing its nuclear program while preparing to deter a nuclear-armed Iran in the future if such efforts fail. In both cases, U.S. leverage may be more limited than many assume. Specifically, the United States should:

- **Avoid putting public pressure on Israel.** Such pressure (for example, linking aid packages to policy shifts) is likely to backfire in the current environment where Israel's sense of isolation is pervasive, turning popular opinion against the United States and thus allowing for only more defiant positions among Israeli leaders.
- **Quietly attempt to influence internal Israeli debates about the utility of a military strike.** The United States has an interest in bolstering those voices in Israel arguing against this option, which would also negatively affect U.S. interests and make it more difficult to contain Iranian influence in the future. To the extent they agree, U.S. intelligence officials, for example, could quietly support the assessments of former Israeli officials who have publicly argued against a military option. Private U.S.-sponsored intelligence and military seminars targeted at Israeli intelligence and military officials outlining U.S. concerns and risk assessments of military strike options could also help shape this internal debate. The strong ongoing military-to-military relationship between the United States and Israel will remain a critical channel for attempts to influence the Israeli debates.
- **Continue to bolster security cooperation and intelligence-sharing with Israel, making such efforts more visible to the Israeli public.** Such cooperation is important not only in efforts to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran but also to help prepare for a future if such efforts fail. Making the extensive U.S.-Israeli security cooperation more known to the Israeli public may help assuage their fears of isolation and make them less tolerant of Israeli leaders who defy U.S. policy preferences. Encouraging Israeli leaders and journalists to report more about security cooperation efforts could be helpful in this regard.
- **Engage in activities that increase understanding about how a deterrence relationship between Israel and Iran may evolve.** Continuing war games that are already taking place through non-governmental institutions in both the United States and Israel can help develop and explore various conflict path scenarios involving Israel and Iran. Such games are an important start in understand-

ing how an Israeli-Iranian nuclear relationship might evolve and what types of military and political actions might heighten or diminish conflict escalation.

- **Encourage direct communication between Israelis and Iranians through track two dialogues.** Both Israel and Iran will have an interest over time in managing and preventing nuclear conflict should Iran acquire nuclear weapons capabilities. Such communication will not be possible at official levels in the immediate future but is possible through unofficial, track two security dialogues among Israeli and Iranian security experts, sponsored by U.S. or European nongovernmental institutions.
- **Continue both engagement and sanction policies that may affect the internal debate in Iran on nuclear weaponization.** Iranian leaders are not necessarily intent on the weaponization of the nuclear program. Iran may be developing the know-how and infrastructure for assembling nuclear weapons, but it may decide to keep its nuclear program in the virtual realm. Iran's decisions are based on cost-benefit calculations that are affected by U.S. pressures and perhaps positive inducements.
- **Consider future scenarios in which the current Iranian regime is radically transformed.** Iranian fundamentalists appear to have consolidated power after the 2009 presidential election. However, the regime continues to demonstrate severe fractures and faces critical vulnerabilities, including widespread popular dissatisfaction and deepening internal cleavages. The domination of the political system by either the Revolutionary Guards or more democratic forces such as the Green Movement is a long-term possibility. Each scenario could significantly reshape the Israeli-Iranian rivalry and U.S. policy. Hence, the United States should not only focus on the nuclear program but should pay close attention to such issues as human rights abuses in Iran. This signals to the Iranian people and to Iran's potential future rulers that the United States cares about Iran as a nation and sees it not merely as a problem to be solved.