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Deterrence: Hiroshima Mon Amour

By Richard E. Friedman

A recent strategic war game exercise was conducted by the National Strategy Forum (NSF) concluding that Israel is highly likely to launch an airstrike mission against Iran's nuclear weapon development program. The exercise focused on the efficacy of a wide range of deterrents, which were determined not to have sufficient bite to cause Iran to halt its nuclear program. In so doing, the discussants assessed the spectre of the U.S. use of nuclear weapons against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. During World War II, the U.S. could not divulge the existence of its nuclear weapons. However, the Hiroshima/Nagasaki experience may be instructive—how to caution Iran, without either Iran or Israel actually using nuclear weapons?

The strategic issues for the U.S. and Israel are based on Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon and the consequence that this might have on the U.S. and Israel strategic calculus. In particular, an NSF war game concluded that there is a likelihood of an Israel airstrike on Iran's nuclear weapon development facilities in the immediate future. The objective of this mission would be to delay, but not to prevent Iran from ultimately acquiring a nuclear weapon.

The focus of this essay is that Israel has an unused deterrent vehicle—old fashioned, bloody, bludgeon propaganda. The incentive for Israel is that by exercising maximum deterrent force, it might reach its objectives without an airstrike, and Iran voluntarily halting its nuclear weapons program.

Israel's objective is to terminate, or at least retard, Iran's nuclear development program. The preferable option is voluntary cessation by Iran's ruling elites. This is unlikely because of the regime's current posture. The next best option is regime change, based upon the assumption that a new regime might determine that it would be in their best strategic interest to terminate Iran's nuclear weapon development program.

Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) was effective in the prolonged U.S.-U.S.S.R. Cold War. However, the MAD option was examined in the airstrike exercise, and was rejected because traditional cost-benefit analysis may not apply to Iran's elite leadership – “We love death more than you love life.” However, a variant of MAD could be applied to Iran.

The efficacy of deterrence theory is substantially diminished when one party does not play by traditional rules. However, the Iranian public as a whole may not endorse the regime's stated policy. A split between the Iranian elite leadership and Iranian population could be the pivotal focus of deterrence strategy.

To be effective, there must be a clear and well-defined declaration of intent made by a potential attacker. To date, Israel's declaration of intent (airstrike) is not compelling. The U.S. declaration of intent to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon has been by three rounds of economic sanctions, the results of which are not well-defined.

Credibility is another dimension of deterrence. From Iran's perspective it is likely that Israel will launch a limited airstrike which, even if successful, will result only in delay. Iran's calculus might be that the U.S. will not launch a pre-emptive airstrike, but it will tacitly aid and abet Israel's attack. Thus, Iran may regard U.S. military assistance to an Israeli airstrike as inevitable. To this extent, only economic sanctions are regarded by Iran as credible. Iran's calculus involves an assessment of political, clearly defined intentions, and attacker capability. U.S. capability is, of course, present, but the U.S. political will is substantially degraded by U.S. citizen war-weariness (Afghanistan and Iraq) and the U.S. military opposition to opening a third theater of operations involving Iran.

Israel has a dramatic, unused deterrent. Before attacking Iran, Israel could communicate to the Iranian public that its response to an Iranian nuclear attack on Israel would be absolute, certain, severe, and instantaneous. In effect, this would be a unilateral variant of MAD. The counter-argument to this declaration of intent is that Israel has not confirmed that it has nuclear weapon capability, certainly of a substantially higher magnitude than that of Iran. A proposed independent television documentary deterrent could define Israel's nuclear capability and the magnitude of its retaliatory nuclear response to Iran's first strike. Israel would not produce the proposed nuclear television documentary, but it would cooperate with an independent producer.

Israel has two potential negotiating parties: one, Iran's elite leadership; and, two, Iran's general population. The downside of an Israeli airstrike, as noted above, even if successful, would cause Iran nuclear weapon delay. An airstrike runs the risk of causing the Iranian public to "rally 'round the flag" because the Iranian public would be only minimally harmed, and the result could retard regime change.

Assume that Iran would have no more than one or two low-kiloton nuclear bombs that would have a catastrophic effect on Israel. By comparison, Israel's nuclear weapon arsenal is massive. Consider the following graphic television documentary scenario. It would be made clear that every Iranian population center, its critical infrastructure, and military installations would be targeted for Israel nuclear attack.

A survivability calculus is composed of demographics, vulnerability, morbidity, economic consideration, including destruction of critical infrastructure. In gross terms, Iran's population is 66 million; Israel's population is 7 million. This is a 9:1 ratio. Although Israel's population morbidity resulting from an Iran nuclear weapon attack would be horrific, catastrophic, and an abomination to behold, the deterrent mathematics suggest that Iran would be totally destroyed as

a country by an Israeli nuclear retaliatory strike. This is a brutal calculation, but it was used successfully during the Cold War.

Propaganda has fallen out of favor since WWII. It is regarded as being a bludgeon that might not be understood by an technology-savvy, sophisticated population. However, people are affected by an accurate, emotional appeal to their survival instincts. For example, the 1959 film *Hiroshima - Mon Amour* depicted the nuclear horror visited upon the population of Hiroshima. The Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear explosions were used by the U.S. to end the War in the Pacific. The U.S. could not and did not warn the Japanese in advance, because the weapon was highly secret, and there was great uncertainty regarding whether the nuclear device would explode. The film depicted the effects of the August 6, 1945 Hiroshima bomb, particularly the immediate loss of hair of the survivors, and the hundreds of acres of completely anonymous corpses of the victims. Upon its release, the film become iconic, motivating international discussion of the morality of possession and use of nuclear weapons.

Perhaps "bludgeon" propaganda could be used again. Neither Iran nor Israel would be compelled to use nuclear force if this television documentary deterrent could deter Iran from pursuing its nuclear weapon development program.

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