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Toward a different nuclear policy

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Toward a different nuclear policy

In the past month - either as an integral part of the election campaign or due to external reasons - there has been a revival of the debate on the need, feasibility and timing of an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities. Benjamin Netanyahu's declaration of the need to do so, Ariel Sharon's confirmation of the existence of such a military option, the cautions issued by the director of Military Intelligence and by the IDF chief of staff that Iran is expected to reach the point of no return in March 2006, and articles by several experts imply that the issue is very much on the mind of Israel's defense establishment.

This development is not unrelated to the news that Israel has purchased two submarines from Germany, which the foreign media reports are intended to shore up Israel's second-strike capability.

The debate on Iran's nuclear capability, and the Israeli response to it, raises to the surface a fundamental paradox that is inherent to Israeli nuclear policy. The fact that preemptive military action is even under discussion is cogent proof that those steering our defense policy - and Israeli defense experts, the vast majority of whom are ardent supporters of Israel's nuclear policy - in effect do not believe that Israel possesses effective nuclear deterrence.

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On the one hand, they cultivate an image of nuclear capability for the purpose of deterring potential adversaries. On the other, whenever any state in the region is suspected of nearing the threshold of nuclear capability, they begin to consult on the requisite military move to forestall such an eventuality.

The Begin Doctrine - which declared that Israel will not allow any country in the region to develop weapons of mass destruction - was never actually implemented, and the fact is that the majority of Israel's neighbors have developed substantial chemical, biological and missile capacities.

Nevertheless, the doctrine is dusted off - in word and in thought - whenever the nuclear dark cloud drifts over the region, and that does not necessarily mean over the skies of Israel.

By now it is clear that Israel's nuclear image presents no deterrent to guerrilla warfare and terror, that it does not deter Arab states from limited wars (Yom Kippur, for instance), and that it did not deter Saddam Hussein from launching Scud missiles at population centers in Israel. The mere consideration of a preemptive strike indicates that the possibility of mutual nuclear deterrence does not hold out much promise. All parties agree that nuclear deterrence is ineffective against an irrational enemy. If that is the case, then what exactly is Israel achieving by its nuclear image?

Israel also excels in creativity and assertiveness on matters related to military initiatives. Part of this superiority derives from the fact that its defense policy has been characterized by a tendency to wield a light trigger finger whenever a real or imagined threat has surfaced.

Conversely, Israel's peace policy is distinguished by a response-driven approach: diffidence, over-cautiousness and a predilection for avoiding risks. The debate on the Iranian nuclear threat is notable not only for the arguments for and against a military attack, but also for what is not being said. It lacks any serious discussion of the possibility of Israel launching a diplomatic initiative to eliminate nuclear weapons in the Middle East.

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The contradiction inherent to the Israeli nuclear policy - stoking the image of a nuclear deterrent capacity to whose effectiveness Israel itself does not subscribe - requires a profound reexamination of the internal logic of this policy. The time has come to begin relating to Israel's nuclear image as a negotiating chip, and to seriously consider if a Middle East disarmed of weapons of mass destruction would not be preferable to a nuclear Middle East, or to a Middle East in which Israel possesses a nuclear monopoly.

Israel could bring real international pressure to bear if it were to initiate nuclear disarmament. It is mature enough and strong enough to consider the principle of "he who dares, wins" not only by means of military initiatives, but also in the matter of diplomatic initiatives.

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