



## **With Nothing to Lose: The Limits of a Rational Iran**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Lost in the debate over Iran is the possibility that Iran is a rational actor that cannot be deterred. Historical examples show that even rational leaders, when faced with the loss of their regimes, are willing to destroy despite not having much to gain. Iranian leaders may strike Israel with nuclear weapons if they feel they have nothing to lose.

There is no debate that a nuclear-armed Iran would have the capability to destroy Israel. Israel is a small country, with half of its Jewish population and GDP confined to three cities (Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa); the destruction of any two of them would be devastating. Iran also has the technological means to launch such a strike. Furthermore, there is not much debate that Iran is gaining the capability to develop nuclear weapons, despite its denials. There is a debate, however, over how much of a threat a nuclear Iran would be to Israel, and whether it can be deterred. If it can be deterred, Israel can accept a nuclear Iran. However, if it cannot be deterred then all actions, including a military strike, would be preferable to a nuclear-armed Iran.

### **Can Iran Be Deterred?**

On one side of the debate are the realists – among them former Secretary of State Zbigniew Brzezinski and the late Kenneth Waltz – who claim that Iran is a deterrable country, led by rational and cost-calculating leaders who do not wish to commit suicide. Just as the Soviet Union, China, Pakistan, and North Korea were deterred from using nuclear weapons, they argue, so too Iran can be deterred from using nuclear weapons.

On the other side of the debate are those who argue that Iran may not be deterrable, and that a comparison to the Cold War is incorrect. Iran's leaders could be religious fanatics bent on causing a global catastrophe that would usher in the "hidden Imam" and an Islamic paradise. Iran has the capability to transfer its weapons to terror groups, such as Hizballah and Hamas. Accidents, such as a mistakenly-detonated nuclear weapon, could trigger Iranian leaders to blame Israel and launch missiles. The lack of ties between Iran and Israel also limit Israel's ability to deter Iran (as opposed to the Cold War, during which the US and USSR had diplomatic relations). Unauthorized launchings by lower-level government members could also conceivably occur. It is for these reasons, it is argued, that Iran cannot be deterred.

An overlooked possibility, however, is that Iranian leaders are rational but likely to launch nuclear weapons against Israel or the US anyway. This would happen if Iranian leaders feel they are at the point of being toppled from within. Facing the end of their rule, and possibly their lives, they are likely to lash out against Israel or the US in a parting shot for posterity.

### **Rational Leaders Behaving Erratically**

History has shown us that several rational leaders, when faced with the end of their regimes, were willing to behave erratically. Waltz's view that no leader would launch nuclear weapons against a nuclear-armed state, knowing that such an action would be suicidal, is called into question by former Cuban leader Fidel Castro's behavior during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Castro's ability to seize and hold onto to power for five decades proves that he was a rational actor. During the crisis, fearing for the survival of his regime, he lobbied Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev to strike the US with nuclear weapons, knowing that such a strike would plunge the world into nuclear war and kill millions. What saved the world was not the rationality or restraint of Castro, who was determined to save his regime at all costs, but rather his lack of ability to start a nuclear war.

Another example is Saddam Hussein's behavior during the First Gulf War in 1991. When faced with the loss of Kuwait and his hold on power, Saddam ordered his troops to set Kuwait's 700 oil wells ablaze and pour 11 million barrels of oil into the Persian Gulf. Burning the fields caused an environmental hazard across the region and made no sense; it was destruction for destruction's sake. This is yet another example of a desperate leader doing anything to hold to power when he felt threatened.

A third example is Syrian President Bashar Assad's actions during the ongoing Syrian civil war, which has claimed almost 100,000 lives. US

President Barack Obama threatened Assad that should the Syrian leader use chemical weapons he would be crossing a “red line” that would provoke an American response. In November 2012, Israel told the US that Syrian agents were loading Sarin gas into bombs. In March 2013 there was strong evidence that Assad used Sarin against insurgents and civilians in Aleppo, yet we have not yet seen an American response. It is clear that American deterrent threats against Syria have not worked.

### **What About Iran?**

These examples can be reassuring when it comes to Iran, because none of them involve the use of weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, the “Arab Spring” has not seen the use of such weapons despite losses of power across the region. This does not mean, however, that concerns over a falling Iranian regime are exaggerated. The above examples prove that it was not the rational behavior of leaders or deterrence that prevented catastrophe, but rather the absence of a key ingredient in each case.

There are three components of catastrophe: the leadership believes it has nothing to lose; it has extreme hatred against a country or group; and it has the capability to unleash weapons of mass destruction. Though Castro, Saddam, and Assad believed they had nothing to lose, and hated a country or group, they were each missing the **capability** to wreak havoc. This was also true in the “Arab Spring.” However, the Iranian leadership is close to meeting all of the requirements for disaster. The regime’s hold on power is increasingly shaky, especially in the wake of the “Arab Spring,” from which the winds of change may arrive in Iran. The leadership hates the US and Israel, and has made many statements threatening Israel’s existence. If the Iranian regime teeters on the brink of oblivion, all that would stop it from striking Israel is a lack of capability. With thousands of centrifuges spinning, Iran will soon get the capability to develop the nuclear weapons to do what it has threatened. If the prospects of horrendous retaliation were not enough to deter the above leaders, why should we expect the Mullahs to be different?

### **Conclusion**

Israel is now considering launching a military strike on Iran. There are many reasons not to do so – it might not work; it might only help in the short term; Iranian retaliation would be costly; it could potentially damage ties with the US – but if Iranian cannot be deterred, a nuclear-armed Iran is unacceptable, whatever the cost. Israel will never know with 100 percent confidence whether or not Iran can be deterred, but is this uncertainty a risk it is willing to take?

As Iran's leaders pursue their nuclear quest, Israel and the US have reason to be afraid. While there is hope that diplomacy and economic sanctions will divert Iran from its nuclear path, if they are not successful there may be no choice but a military option. Despite its horrendous implications, a military strike is preferable to a nuclear-armed Iran whose leaders are likely one day to find themselves with nothing to lose and everything to destroy.

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