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# How Israel Thinks About Iran's Future



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1. Author interviews, September 2023.

2. As cited in Gary Rosenblatt, "Can Iran's Nuclear Push Be Stopped?" Jewish Telegraphic Agency, November 25, 2009, <https://www.jta.org/2009/11/25/ny/can-irans-nuclear-push-be-stopped>.

3. See, for instance, Francois Murphy, "Iran expands stocks of near-nuclear grade uranium, IAEA reports no progress," Reuters, September 4, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iaea-reports-no-progress-iran-uranium-stock-enriched-60-grows-2023-09-04/>; "European powers, US warn Iran over unexplained nuclear materials," *The Times of Israel*, September 14, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/european-powers-us-warn-iran-over-unexplained-nuclear-materials/>.

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For Israel, the Islamic Republic of Iran represents both a cardinal security challenge and an existential danger. The country's current clerical regime is estimated to be connected to some "80 percent" of the contemporary security problems confronting the Jewish state.<sup>1</sup> These include not only Iran's increasingly mature nuclear program, but also its extensive sponsorship of extremist proxies throughout the Mideast, as well as the radical expansionist ideology that continues to animate the regime in Tehran.

In recent years, the gravity of this danger, together with Iran's rising regional profile and growing political power, has helped shape Israeli policy on everything from Mideast security to nuclear nonproliferation. It has contributed to Israel's development of advanced defense systems, among them the Arrow and Iron Dome. It has informed the country's counterterrorism policy toward the Palestinian Territories, where rejectionist groups such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad now wield Iranian-origin weaponry. And it has animated Jerusalem's growing ties with the Arab world, a process which culminated in the signing of the Abraham Accords some three years ago.

By contrast, Israeli views on Iran's future are far less well known. While policymakers in Jerusalem have focused extensively on the nature and activities of the current regime in Tehran, what

shape a future Iran might take is rarely discussed and deliberated publicly. Yet Israel's views on what might come after the Islamic Republic offer important strategic context, and potential insights, for the United States in its own approach to the region.

## ANTICIPATING IRANIAN NUCLEARIZATION

Back in 2009, Tel Aviv University professor David Menashri, widely considered the dean of Israeli Iran studies, explained the tension between the Islamic Republic's nuclear advances and its internal political situation this way: "Two trains have left the station. The nuclear program, and the move toward political change within Iranian society. The problem is that the nuclear train is moving faster."<sup>2</sup>

Nearly a decade-and-a-half on, there can be no question that this assessment is correct. Iran's nuclear program is today increasingly robust, advanced and distributed in nature,<sup>3</sup> while domestic opposition to clerical rule within Iran, though persistent, has failed to produce meaningful internal change.

This state of affairs has engendered a broad Israeli consensus on two points. The first is that Iran's nuclear program is here to stay. Experts concur that Iran is now nearly nuclear, thanks to concerted



investments by Iran's clerical regime as well as the policies of successive American administrations, which have permitted Tehran to continue its pursuit of the bomb – albeit at a slower pace. Moreover, they concur that, even at its most effective, military action against Iran's nuclear program will only result in a delay of its progress toward the bomb, rather than accomplish a complete denuclearization of the Islamic Republic.<sup>4</sup>

The second is that the Iranian regime has successfully made its quest for nuclear status a defining feature of its national policy, as well as a priority among ordinary Iranians. Indeed, a 2011 survey of Iranian opinion carried out by the RAND Corporation discovered that a decisive 87 percent of respondents favored the development of a civilian nuclear program, and a significant minority (thirty-two percent of those polled) favored the development of offensive nuclear weapons.<sup>5</sup> More recent assessments track with these findings; in a 2020 survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 90 percent of those polled backed the establishment of a civilian nuclear program in Iran, and 41 percent supported the development of an offensive nuclear arsenal.<sup>6</sup> This situation suggests that, broadly speaking, a quest for nuclear status will remain a popular national cause, as well as a priority for a future Iranian government regardless of its political orientation or composition.

For Israel, this does not necessarily represent a problem. Israeli policymakers appear reconciled to the notion that a future Iran will invariably retain some

measure of nuclear know-how. They also believe this to be a tolerable condition, provided that the new government in Tehran is more moderate, transparent and pragmatic than the current one.<sup>7</sup> In the view of many, the current situation – in which Iran's radical, ideological regime is rapidly approaching nuclear status – represents a “worst-case scenario” which would be improved by virtually any future path that Iran might take.<sup>8</sup>

## THE PERSISTENCE OF IRANIAN INFLUENCE

Since the early days of Iran's Islamic revolution, the country has ranked as the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism, subsidizing and enabling the activities of a broad range of proxies as part of its imperative of “exporting” its radical religious revolution. The result has been the creation of an extensive trans-state proxy network consisting of Lebanon's powerful Hezbollah militia, Palestinian rejectionist groups, assorted Shi'a militias in Iraq, Yemen's Houthi rebels and other assorted radicals. These actors, in turn, have helped to target perceived “enemies” of Iran's clerical government, and to advance its long-held drive for regional hegemony.<sup>9</sup>

That latter priority, in the view of Israeli experts, is unlikely to change much. Regardless of its political composition, a future Iran “will continue to seek to shape the region,” they posit.<sup>10</sup> Such a priority, moreover, is natural, given the country's long imperial history and its long-standing influence throughout

4. See, for instance, “Gantz declares Israel can ‘seriously harm and delay’ Iranian nuclear program,” *The Times of Israel*, July 26, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/gantz-declares-israel-can-seriously-harm-and-delay-iranian-nuclear-program/>.

5. Sara Beth Elson and Alireza Nader, “What Do Iranians Think? A Survey of Attitudes on the United States, the Nuclear Program, and the Economy,” *RAND Technical Report*, 2011, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical\\_reports/2011/RAND\\_TR910.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical_reports/2011/RAND_TR910.pdf).

6. Dina Smeltz and Amir Farmanesh, “Majority of Iranians Oppose Development of Nuclear Weapons,” Chicago Council on Global Affairs Public Opinion Survey, March 31, 2020, <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/majority-iranians-oppose-development-nuclear-weapons>.

7. Author interviews, September 2023.

8. Ibid.

9. See, for instance, Graham E. Fuller, *The Center of the Universe: The Geopolitics of Iran* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1991).

10. Author interviews, September 2023.



11. Ibid.

12. For a detailed discussion, see Ilan Berman, *The Fight for Iran: Politics, Protest, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Nation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

13. Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright and Erica Frantz, "Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set," *Perspectives on Politics* 13, iss. 2, July 2014.

14. Author interviews, September 2023.

the region. However, a new Iranian government is likely to seek to assert itself in different ways.

For instance, while it will, in all probability, attempt to maintain its influence over Lebanon, it could abandon its current sponsorship of Hezbollah in favor of other political groupings – particularly if a future Iranian government is truly post-theocratic. A similar situation is likely to prevail in Iraq, where a future Iran may temper its support for Shi'ite militias but still seek to shape national politics through sympathetic politicians and parties. In the Israeli calculus, such activity isn't a problem, *per se*, provided the next regime in Tehran does not seek to "weaponize" its proxies and actors against the Jewish state, the way the current one does.<sup>11</sup>

## DOES REGIME CHARACTER MATTER?

Virtually without exception, Western discussions of political change in Iran in recent years have revolved around a potential transition toward democracy. Not surprisingly, the manifestos, platforms and principles of practically all Iranian opposition groups active today have echoed this preference, and espouse a commitment to greater political pluralism.<sup>12</sup> While some of these sentiments are no doubt genuine, others can be surmised to have been adopted as a way of currying favor with Washington and assorted European governments.

In truth, however, a transition to democracy is not the most likely

outcome of political transformation within Iran. Rather, in historical terms, an "autocratic to autocratic" transition is far more common among authoritarian regimes that experience some sort of significant internal change.<sup>13</sup> In other words, scenarios in which an entrenched "selectorate" already possessing significant economic and political power – such as Iran's powerful clerical army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – assumes control of the state remain more likely than a deep-rooted democratic transformation.

In principle, Israel would not be averse to such an outcome. While the country would ideally prefer to see a transition to true democracy in Tehran, Israeli observers are quick to point out that they have extensive experience dealing with authoritarian regimes in their immediate neighborhood, and that such modes of government are much more natural and endemic to the Middle East. As such, they maintain, it would be possible for Israel to live with an undemocratic Iran, provided it is more accountable and less antagonistic.<sup>14</sup>

## PROTESTS, NOT REVOLUTION

In September of 2022, Iranian security forces detained and brutalized a young Kurdish-Iranian woman named Mahsa Amini for her lax application of the Islamic headscarf, leading to her death in custody. Amini's killing sparked an outpouring of outrage that coalesced into widespread, sustained





protests calling for fundamental political change. A year on, many in the Iranian opposition still maintain that this effort has the potential to lead to a change of regime in Tehran.<sup>15</sup>

Israeli views, by contrast, are more sober. In the words of experts there, the protests so far have been missing at least three “key ingredients.”<sup>16</sup>

The first is a true groundswell of popular opposition. While the current protests continue to take place sporadically throughout the country, they remain limited in size and scope. As such, they stand in contrast to the millions who took to the streets as part of the “Green Movement” that swept the country in mid-2009, following the fraudulent reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the Iranian presidency.

The second is a coalition of diverse social forces (encompassing students, workers, merchants and more) with different agendas and socio-economic backgrounds. No such grouping has yet come together within the country itself. And while the Spring of 2023 saw the formation of a coalition of prominent opposition figures in the United States, including former Iranian Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi and Nobel Laureate Shirin Abadi, it proved to be short-lived, ultimately collapsing as a result of internal divisions and divergent political agendas.<sup>17</sup>

The third are divisions within the country’s political elite and its security services. Early on in the protests, there were indications that at least some

fissures had begun to appear in the edifice of the regime.<sup>18</sup> However, these fractures, if they were ever truly present, turned out to be decidedly short-lived. The regime quickly regrouped, consolidated power, and has since used its instruments of repression to confront and suppress Iran’s protestors.

In the absence of these “essential” elements, Israeli observers say, the potential for meaningful, lasting change within Iran remains limited, although they acknowledge the likelihood that the Iranian regime will adjust at least some of its policies to accommodate the new reality of persistent grassroots opposition.

## NOTICING THE IRANIAN OPPOSITION, FINALLY

Back in April, former Iranian Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi visited Israel in a public trip that garnered extensive coverage from national media, and engendered great enthusiasm among Iranian-Israelis.<sup>19</sup> Despite its historic nature, however, Pahlavi’s trip was very much the exception rather than the rule. Despite Israel’s extensive focus on Iran, over the years the country has had little meaningful connectivity with Iranian opposition elements, and only limited outreach to ordinary Iranians.

This may now be changing. Pahlavi’s April visit was organized by Israel’s Intelligence Minister, Gila Gamliel. Since then, Gamliel has made other efforts to engage elements of the Iranian opposition.<sup>20</sup> This activity has given

15. See, for instance, Masih Alinejad, “Why the Murder of Mahsa Amini Could Lead to Revolution,” *The Free Press*, September 16, 2023, <https://www.thefp.com/p/mahsa-amini-murder-iran-revolution>; See also Atena Daemi, “The new Iranian revolution hasn’t died out. It is only getting started,” *Washington Post*, September 21, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/09/21/iran-revolution-hijab-mahsa-amini/>.

16. Author interviews, September 2023.

17. “Iran exiles’ fragile unity fractured, a year after Amini protests,” *Agence France-Presse*, September 12, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230912-iran-exiles-fragile-unity-fractured-a-year-after-amini-protests>.

18. Vivian Yee and Farnaz Fassihi, “Iran Has Abolished Morality Police, an Official Suggests, After Months of Protest,” *New York Times*, December 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/04/world/middleeast/iran-morality-police.html>.

19. Golnaz Esfandiari, “Iranian Former Crown Prince’s ‘Historic’ Trip To Israel Courts Controversy,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 19, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-pahlavi-israel-visit-controversy/32370776.html>.



20. Rina Bassist, "Israeli intelligence minister meets Iranian diaspora in London," *Al-Monitor*, September 6, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/09/israeli-intelligence-minister-meets-iranian-diaspora-london>.

21. Author interviews, September 2023.

22. See, for instance, "The West targeted the holy things of Iranian society with the autumn riots," *Javan* (Tehran), June 22, 2023, <https://www.pishkhan.com/news/304331>.

23. See, for instance, Ben Caspit, "Netanyahu puts Iran, Saudi Arabia at top of agenda," *Al-Monitor*, December 27, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/12/netanyahu-puts-iran-saudi-arabia-top-agenda>.

24. Author interviews, September 2023.

25. "Israel said to approve \$1.5 billion budget for potential strike on Iran," *The Times of Israel*, October 19, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-said-to-approve-1-5-billion-budget-for-potential-strike-on-iran/>.

26. Author's interviews, September 2023.

27. See Lazar Berman and Michael Bachter, "PM says original overhaul proposal 'was bad,' but must fix how Israel chooses judges," *The Times of Israel*, September 18, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/pm-says-original-overhaul-plan-was-a-bad-one-months-after-championing-it/>.

rise to considerable speculation, with some observers suggesting that Israel's current government is beginning to formulate a more serious approach to Iran's opposition, and others viewing the overtures with skepticism.<sup>21</sup> Notably, critics warn, such activity carries with it considerable downside risks, allowing Iran's regime to paint the current protests as the product of external meddling – something which the Islamic Republic's official organs have indeed been quick to do.<sup>22</sup>

On the whole, Israel's government does not appear better informed about, or connected to, Iranian opposition elements than are its counterparts in the West. If anything, the opposite is true, owing to the Jewish state's traditional isolation in the highly-fractious Middle East. This state of affairs is deeply puzzling, because while various Western nations have flirted with the notion that it might be possible to change the Islamic Republic's behavior through political and economic inducements, Israel is under no such illusions. Nevertheless, successive governments in Jerusalem have failed to invest much energy or effort in exploring viable alternatives to the current regime in Tehran.

## THE WAGES OF ISRAEL'S JUDICIAL REFORM

When the current Israeli government came to power late last year, returning Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu initially put two issues – the normalization of relations with Saudi Arabia, and thwarting Iran's

nuclear ambitions – at the top of his strategic agenda.<sup>23</sup> Quickly, however, another matter has come to dominate national politics in Israel. Netanyahu's coalition government, dominated by far-right religious parties, put forward a controversial plan to reform the country's judiciary that has profoundly roiled the country and created the most significant domestic crisis in the Jewish state's 75-year history.

In the process, the question of Iran has receded from national attention. Today, Israeli experts observe, Netanyahu "has stopped talking about Iran and focused inside."<sup>24</sup> As a result, they say, serious planning for a military response to Iran – which was ramped up by previous Prime Minister Naftali Bennett<sup>25</sup> – appears to have stalled. At the same time, amid a downturn in relations with the United States, Israel is giving off the appearance that it has "acquiesced" to the Biden administration's approach to Iran, which entails sweeping concessions and financial inducements to the Iranian regime.<sup>26</sup>

Israel's domestic turmoil could have a marked effect on its ability to affect Iran's strategic capabilities as well. As part of the current judicial reform protests, military reservists – including, significantly, those from the country's air force – have threatened not to report for duty or training. While such absenteeism has not yet occurred, a large scale walkout of the sort now being threatened by opponents of the Netanyahu government's reform efforts could lead to a significant erosion of military capabilities overall, and to a marked decline in the credibility of



an independent Israeli military option against Iran's nuclear program.

Of late, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has signaled at least some willingness to compromise with his political opponents on this subject.<sup>27</sup> However, it is clear that his coalition government, at least as currently constituted, is committed to pressing ahead with judicial reform for the foreseeable future. In turn, how the issue evolves will have a marked impact on Israel's other priorities – prominent among them its policy toward Iran. ♦♦

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