



Academic Paper

# Israeli Scenarios of Facing the Iranian Nuclear Program



**Prof. Dr. Walid 'Abd al-Hay**

May 2021



Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies & Consultations

The opinions expressed in all the publications and studies are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of al-Zaytouna Centre.

# Israeli Scenarios of Facing the Iranian Nuclear Program

Prof. Dr. Walid ‘Abd al-Hay\*

## Introduction

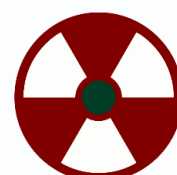
Israel’s strategy in the field of nuclear armament is based on two important pillars: the first is monopolizing the possession of nuclear weapons in the Middle East and working on the world acceptance of this monopoly. Accordingly, it will do everything in its power to establish this principle as was historically demonstrated in the beginnings of its nuclear project in the late 1950s with the pursuit of Egyptian scientists and killing some of them, striking the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981, the direct and indirect pressures on Libya, striking the Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007 and even raising some allegations against Algeria in an earlier period.

The second pillar is the adoption of what is called strategic ambiguity,<sup>1</sup> which means that Israel does not acknowledge its possession of nuclear weapons. Rather, it makes others in the international community deal with it as a nuclear state without any obligations to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and without accepting the idea of freeing the region from nuclear weapons or agreeing to include it within the issue of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Through its nuclear project, Iran has posed a serious challenge to this Israeli strategy, as Israel believes that the Iranian nuclear project is strategically a military project. Therefore, possessing this weapon means deeply destabilizing the Israeli strategy, whether in terms of ending the nuclear monopoly in the



\* An expert in futures studies, a former professor in the Department of Political Science at Yarmouk University in Jordan and a holder of Ph.D. in Political Science from Cairo University. He is also a former member of the Board of Trustees of Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, Irbid National University, the National Center for Human Rights, the Board of Grievances and the Supreme Council of Media. He has authored 37 books, most of which are focused on future studies in both theoretical and practical terms, and published 118 research papers in peer-reviewed academic journals.



Middle East or regarding the viability of strategic ambiguity as an effective policy.

## **First: Israeli Options for Dealing with the Iranian Nuclear Program**

The Israeli options for dealing with the Iranian nuclear program can be identified in three strategic options:

### **1. Strategy of Attrition Against Iran**

The attrition strategy is based on the continuous disruption of Iran's nuclear capabilities. It is a strategy, which Israel followed throughout 2000–2013, when negotiations with the P5 + 1 began. It includes disrupting Iranian capabilities through:<sup>2</sup>

- a. Destruction of infrastructure, whether by direct strikes, bombing operations, or through cyber-attacks, as happened at the Natanz nuclear site in mid-2020 and in April 2021, or by disabling the computers managing the program, as happened in 2010, when the CIA and Mossad did joint work in this respect. However, the escalation of cyber warfare and its development must take into account that various reports have confirmed Iran's possession of significant capabilities in this field. It was evident in some of its attacks throughout 2012–2020, whether on Gulf targets (Aramco, Western companies) or American institutions (companies, universities, government agencies), and some reports estimate these attacks to be around three thousand throughout 2010–2020.<sup>3</sup>



**Targeting Aramco facilities in 2019**

Furthermore, such an Israeli strategy will face increasing difficulties given that the Iranian security measures will increase in accuracy and expansion with the recurrence of Israeli sabotage operations. This would make matters for the Israeli strategy more difficult, limiting its impact.



b. Killing Iranian nuclear scientists, where Israel throughout 2010–2012 assassinated four Iranian scientists, and then in November 2020, the assassination of one of the most prominent scientists Mohsen Fakhrizadeh took place.<sup>4</sup> However, Israel’s continued pursuit of such operations may lead Iran to adopt the same strategy towards Israeli scientists through its regional apparatus or arms.



**Mohsen Fakhrizadeh**

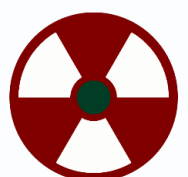
c. Revealing secrets to intensify international pressure. This has happened when in 2018, the Israeli Mossad stole documents from Iran’s nuclear archive. Such an operation is usually done by Israeli agencies or in cooperation with the Iranian opposition, US or European intelligence, or with regional intelligence services, especially the Arab ones.<sup>5</sup>



d. Media focus on the program’s dangers to the region, security and global peace, thus reinforcing the international mistrust in Iran.

e. Supporting the Iranian opposition in hope of changing the Iranian regime, a policy in place since 1979. There are conflicting reports about communication between the US and Israel on the one hand, and the Iranian opposition forces, especially the People’s Mujahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), on the other hand. However, such relations, even when they are confirmed, have not led to tangible results, especially concerning the political stability in Iran.

f. Rigorous efforts to maintain the largest amount of economic sanctions on Iran, hoping that the economic hardship will push the Iranian regime to either yield or face internal problems. However, the history of economic sanctions aimed at changing regimes does not show clear success in this respect, as demonstrated by the historical experience of embargoes imposed unilaterally by the US on other countries. A review of US



embargo policies, from the end of World War II until the collapse of the Soviet Union, and from that period until 2018 when the US abolished the nuclear agreement with Iran, shows the following results:<sup>6</sup>

- A documented study of the Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE) indicates that unilateral US sanctions have achieved foreign policy goals in only 13% of the cases where they have been imposed. This means that the response rate of the blockaded country to US conditions was very low during about 73 years.
- During the unilateral sanctions since 1970 and until 1990, the US lost nearly \$17 billion annually in potential exports, which translates into 200 thousand jobs lost.
- Out of 115 cases of economic sanctions beginning with World War II to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the success rate of blockade in general (from the US and others) in reducing the economic growth of the besieged country is only 2.4%.
- There were 16 cases of unilateral US sanctions throughout 1945–1990, where 11 cases were during the 1945–1970 period. This means that the number of cases decreased during the following 20 years to only 5, that is more than 50% decrease.



The previous indicators mean perhaps, that the “history” of politically motivated economic sanctions is not highly successful enough to proceed with it. However, that does not mean it has no impact.

Likewise, the continuation of pressure policies against Iran, through sanctions or tactical military strikes, or evading the European obligations in the nuclear deal, may push Tehran, as it did in the first quarter of 2021, to pursue policies of gradual abandonment of its obligations in the agreement. Hence, more developed centrifuges would be deployed, and then gradually raising the rates of uranium enrichment to 60% purity.<sup>7</sup>

Most international estimates reveal that such exhaustion tactics can mostly disrupt the development of the Iranian nuclear program for 2-4 years only. Remarkably, these Israeli actions have become less acceptable to some countries, especially some European countries, Russia and China,



because they are aware that the Israeli goal is to disrupt efforts to revive the 2015 nuclear deal.<sup>8</sup>

However, some believe that the continuing strikes on Iranian facilities and scientists, in addition to the ongoing economic sanctions, may lead to internal unrest and consequently to regime change. However, this remains unsupported by sufficient indicators, especially since the political stability index in Iran, according to “Western” stability models, shows that it has improved throughout 2010-2017 from -1.7 in 2010 to -0.9 in 2017, but it rose again after Donald Trump announced the withdrawal of the US from the nuclear deal in 2018 and reached almost the 2010 rate.<sup>9</sup>

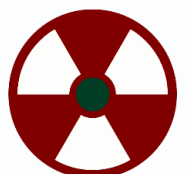


**Trump declares US withdrawal from Iran nuclear deal in 2018**

Yet, this does not negate the existence of indications concerning some internal discontent. For, in 2017, more than thirty Iranian provinces witnessed demonstrations; in early 2020, there were some protests against the Revolutionary Guard’s downing of a Ukrainian plane, and in 2020, the participation in the parliamentary elections was low. However, these demonstrations have occurred previously, and sometimes more sharply, without exceeding the rates of political stability which we have referred to. It seems that the current negotiations with the US administration, albeit indirectly, and with the US side showing some flexibility towards sanctions, enhance the chances of a return to the levels of stability witnessed in 2017.

## **2. Having Regional or Global Forces Bear the Burden of the Confrontation with Iran, as happened with Iraq, Libya and Syria<sup>10</sup>**

It seems that this option is the best for Israel because it has the least human and material cost, and it is the most acceptable one to the Israeli public. An Israeli public opinion survey, in 2018/2019, on how to deal with Iran, the results indicated the following:<sup>11</sup>



- a. 49% of the Israelis view Hizbullah and Iran the most dangerous threat to Israel.
- b. 49% of the Israelis believe that the most appropriate option for Israel in dealing with the Iranian nuclear project is a military attack in cooperation with the US.
- c. 20% of the Israelis believe that the most appropriate option is for the US to work to improve the terms of the nuclear deal with Iran and to make it more favorable to Israeli interests.
- d. 10% of the Israelis support the Israeli attacks on Iran without coordination with the US.

The Israeli relations with the Arab Gulf states, especially the opening of the Gulf airspace for Israeli aviation and the accelerated normalization with Israel, might make the possibilities of this strategy—from the Israeli perspective—greater, although they are not viable enough, even with these conditions. However, the other option is an international coalition to destroy the Iranian nuclear program, with US participation, which was explicitly suggested, in 2013, by French President Francois Hollande, in a meeting with former Israeli President Shimon Peres.<sup>12</sup>

Doubtless, this option is the least expensive for Israel, however, it is not a convincing option for many countries, including the US. Notably, the US has announced its plans to withdraw from Afghanistan in September 2021 and reduce its military presence in Iraq. At the same time, it has major problems with China—commercial and geo-strategic (in the Pacific Basin), and with Russia in Ukraine, in addition to the internal problems of the COVID-19 pandemic, the growing racism and other aspects of US declinism.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, this weakens its tendency of foreign intervention, especially in cases that are more complex, such as Iran.

### **3. Israeli Direct Confrontation with Iran**

For some experts or officials in the Israeli security apparatus, this hypothesis involves some difficulties and repercussions, which may have profound effects on Israel.<sup>14</sup> Such a strategy needs US approval, which seems difficult in light of the preoccupation of the Democratic administration with restoring the US decline in many fields and the handling of the COVID-19



pandemic, in addition, the strategic value of the Middle East for the US has declined.

Interestingly, Iran may go to reactions that would complicate matters for Israel, such as:

- a. The Iranian reaction may lead to strong strikes on population centers in Israel, as Iran may find support from Hizbullah in Lebanon, or even from other forces in Syria or Yemen (by affecting international shipping in the Red Sea) or even Gaza. Although some Israeli experts question Iran's ability to threaten



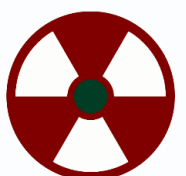
Israeli nuclear facilities, the element of surprise may be one of the aspects of the confrontation between the two sides. For Iranian capabilities are not completely exposed.<sup>15</sup>

- b. Dramatic rise in oil prices at a time when most countries are suffering from the economic repercussions of COVID-19. The world consumes about 97 million barrels per day, a \$10 rise in oil prices will cost the world about one billion dollars a day, which will be unbearable under the



circumstances that we have referred to. The Iranian ability to disrupt the transportation of oil through the Strait of Hormuz in the Arab Gulf is a strong aspect of the Iranian response strategy, for example if a direct Israeli attack occurs. Notably, Iran has increased its military capabilities, acquiring advanced Russian air defense systems.<sup>16</sup>

- c. Israeli strikes in an all-out war with Iran can entail the risk that it may not end the Iranian nuclear program. Some reports talk about secret or fortified sites in hard-to-reach areas, especially nuclear sites in the far eastern border of Iran, in addition to two other important elements that further undermine this Israeli option:<sup>17</sup>





- The first is that the Iranian nuclear program is based on “decentralization,” meaning that it is not like the Iraqi program that can be paralyzed at one fell swoop. It is a program whose facilities are distributed in many and faraway places, which makes striking all of its facilities extremely difficult. If we take into account the nuclear research centers, military complexes, enrichment centers and uranium mines, the number of these “known” facilities reaches nine. They are located in distant cities extending from Bandar Abbas, in the south of Iran, to the city of Bonab in the far northwest, with around 1,500 kilometers between the two cities and 1,035 kilometers between Bonab and Bushehr. Some of these facilities are located in mountainous places, and they are accessed through tunnels extending about 80 meters inside the mountain.<sup>18</sup>



- The second is that the foundations of the Iranian nuclear program have become “national” or local, i.e., they do not depend on foreign sides whether concerning the production of infrastructure or the experts. This indicates that even if assumably the program was significantly damaged, Iran has the abilities to re-run it.<sup>19</sup>
- d. This Israeli strategy may lead to Iran’s withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, or Iran's termination of all forms of cooperation with the IAEA, with all consequent repercussions. This issue has been raised several times in the Iranian parliament.
- e. A direct attack on some Iranian nuclear facilities may involve the risk of a potential nuclear contamination that may affect the entire region (similar to the leak that occurred in the Soviet Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in the 1980s). It could push major countries or regional countries to put pressure on Israel to avoid such a trend.



## Second: Future Outlook

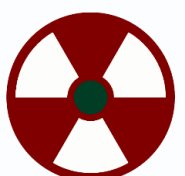
It seems that the Israeli adventure with a unilateral attack on Iran represents the weakest possibility given that international actors mostly oppose this trend, including the US. These global forces believe that diplomacy and economic pressures combined, with “military strikes” targeting Iran or its facilities, especially through cyber-attacks—which seem to be increasing—will provide better results than direct Israeli attack.

As for the possibility of forming an international coalition to attack Iran, similar to the international alliances that directly intervened in Iraq and Libya, and to some extent in Syria, it has diminished due to the current international environment. This includes the US’s awareness of the validity of Paul Kennedy’s theory of the burdens of overstretch, the repercussions of COVID-19 on global economies, especially in Europe and the US, in addition to the Gulf states’ fears that an international confrontation with Iran will make these states the main battlefield, with all the human, economic, environmental and military risks entailed.

This means that the “mutual attacks” between Israel and Iran may continue with all available means for both sides, but we believe that the confrontation fronts will focus on the following dimensions:

1. The increase in cyber-attacks by both sides.
2. The escalation of strikes on the maritime trade routes of both parties.
3. Iran may be tempted to pursue Israeli nuclear scientists or those who have an important scientific role in the development of military industry.

Any deal between the P5 + 1 and Iran may defuse the crisis, and this can be achieved through Iran’s retreat from increasing the centrifuges and not raising uranium enrichment rates beyond what was stipulated in the agreement. In return, the US would lift economic sanctions to an extent that would be appease Iran. This is the worst thing Israel can imagine, and it will make its options very limited in this area. Yet, it will make every possible effort to disrupt the agreement or obstruct it, so as to continue the “attacks,” which it believes is the only available option to have least losses or achieve the largest available gains. Therefore, based on the above, the only Israeli option is the following strategy:



1. Preventing reaching an agreement that would bring the US back to the 2015 deal.
2. If it fails to do so, it will work to add to any new agreement clauses that would increase restrictions on Iran's nuclear program activity, especially those that would impede enrichment operations or expand the scope of inspection of the IAEA to include the largest possible number of Iranian nuclear program facilities.
3. Should its previous step fail, it will work to implement the strategy of Shadow War,<sup>20</sup> which is to keep the situation with Iran ranging between war and peace. The mutual attacks between them would continue, using different tools, within a number of secret and declared strikes, and in different places; the Middle East in particular, or other areas of the world in general.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Zain Hussain, “Why the Israeli Policy of Nuclear Ambiguity is Harmful for Prospects of a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East,” site of BASIC, 21/6/2019, <https://basicint.org/why-the-israeli-policy-of-nuclear-ambiguity-is-harmful-for-prospects-of-a-wmd-free-zone-in-the-middle-east>
- <sup>2</sup> Raz Zimmt, Israeli Campaign to Stop Iran's Nuclear Program, site of The Iran Primer, 15/6/2020, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/jul/15/israeli-campaign-stop-irans-nuclear-program>
- <sup>3</sup> For details, see:  
Nathan Vardi, U.S. Charges Iranian Hackers For Attacking Banks And Targeting Dam, site of *Forbes* magazine, United States, 24/5/2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nathanvardi/2016/03/24/u-s-charges-iranian-hackers-for-attacking-banks-and-targeting-dam/?sh=2570fb794864>; Robert McMillan, Iranian Hackers Have Hit Hundreds of Companies in Past Two Years, site of *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*, New York, 6/3/2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iranian-hackers-have-hit-hundreds-of-companies-in-past-two-years-11551906036?mod=mhp>; Micah Loudermilk, “Iran Crisis Moves Into Cyberspace,” PolicyWatch 3151, site of The Washington Institute For Near East Policy, 9/7/2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-crisis-moves-cyberspace>; and Idrees Ali and Phil Stewart, U.S. carried out secret cyber strike on Iran in wake of Saudi oil attack, site of Reuters, 16/10/2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-iran-military-cyber-exclusive/exclusive-u-s-carried-out-secret-cyber-strike-on-iran-in-wake-of-saudi-oil-attack-officials-say-idUKKBN1WV0EM?edition-redirect=uk>
- <sup>4</sup> Frank Gardner, Mohsen Fakhrazadeh: Iran scientist 'killed by remote-controlled weapon', site of BBC News, 30/11/2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55128970>; and Mehdi Hasan, Iran's nuclear scientists are not being assassinated. They are being murdered, site of The Guardian newspaper, London, 16/1/2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jan/16/iran-scientists-state-sponsored-murder>
- <sup>5</sup> Borzou Daragahi, “Beyond control: Iran and its opponents locked in a lopsided confrontation,” site of *Atlantic Council*, 28/6/2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/beyond-control-iran-and-its-opponents-locked-in-a-lopsided-confrontation>
- <sup>6</sup> See Kimberly Ann Elliott, “Evidence on the Costs and Benefits of Economic Sanctions,” site of Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE), Washington, 23/10/1997, <https://www.piie.com/commentary/testimonies/evidence-costs-and-benefits-economic-sanctions>; Maarten Smeets, “Can economic sanctions be effective?,” WTO Staff Working Paper, No. ERSD-2018-03, World Trade Organization (WTO), Economic Research and Statistics Division, Geneva, site of Econstor, 15/3/2018, <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/176768/1/1016551045.pdf>; and Gary Clyde Hufbauer, Jeffrey J. Schott, Kimberly Ann Elliott, and Barbara Oegg *Conclusions and Policy Recommendations*, 3rd edition (Washington: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2009), [https://piie.com/publications/chapters\\_preview/4075/06iie4075.pdf](https://piie.com/publications/chapters_preview/4075/06iie4075.pdf)
- <sup>7</sup> Farnaz Fassihi, David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, “Iran Vows to Increase Uranium Enrichment After Attack on Nuclear Site,” site of *The New York Times* newspaper, New York, 16/4/2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/13/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-natanz.html>
- <sup>8</sup> Sune Engel Rasmussen and Felicia Schwartz, Attack in Iran Stirs Fears for Future of Nuclear Talks, *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*, 12/4/2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-blames-israel-for-attack-on-nuclear-facility-vows-to-retaliate-11618229993>; and Frank Gardner, “Iran vows revenge for 'Israeli' attack on Natanz nuclear site,” BBC News, 12/4/2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-56715520>
- <sup>9</sup> Iran: Political stability index, site of The Global Economy.com, [https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Iran/wb\\_political\\_stability](https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Iran/wb_political_stability)
- <sup>10</sup> Mitchell Bard, “Military Options Against Iran, site of Jewish Virtual Library,” site of Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/military-options-against-iran>

- 
- <sup>11</sup> Site of The Institute for National Security Studies, <https://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/%D7%9E%D7%93%D7%93%D7%94%D7%91%D7%99%D7%98%D7%97%D7%95%D7%9F%D7%94%D7%9C%D7%90%D7%95%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%91%D7%90%D7%A0%D7%92%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%AA-2019>
- <sup>12</sup> Ari Rabinovitch Jeffrey Heller and Sonya Hepinstall (eds), France’s Hollande assures Israel on Iran nuclear deal, Reuters, 17/11/2013, <https://cn.reuters.com/article/instant-article/idUKBRE9AG06720131117>
- <sup>13</sup> Walid ‘Abd al-Hay, “American Declinism and the Dilemma of Arab and Israeli Strategic Options,” Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations, Beirut, 11/11/2021, <https://eng.alzaytouna.net/2020/11/11/academic-paper-american-declinism-and-the-dilemma-of-arab-and-israeli-strategic-options/#.YJjLcMAzZhE>
- <sup>14</sup> Worst Case Scenario, Catastrophe Predictions, site of Iran Intelligence, <http://www.iranintelligence.com/catastrophe>
- <sup>15</sup> Chaim Levinson, Israel Boosting Defense of Nuclear Reactors Fearing Iranian Missile Attack, site of *Haaretz* newspaper, 28/6/2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israel-boosting-defense-of-nuclear-reactors-fearing-iranian-missile-attack-1.6219937>
- <sup>16</sup> Michael Connell, Farzin Nadimi and John Miller, Iran’s Asymmetric Naval Response to ‘Maximum Pressure,’ PolicyWatch 3327, The Washington Institute For Near East Policy, 10/6/2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-asymmetric-naval-response-maximum-pressure>
- <sup>17</sup> Thomas Harding and Anton La Guardia, Iran Races To Defend Nuclear Facilities, site of Free Republic, 25/1/2006, <https://freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1564345/posts>
- <sup>18</sup> Frank Gardner, “Why Iran’s nuclear facilities are still vulnerable to attack,” BBC News, 19/1/2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55271429>
- <sup>19</sup> Max Boot, Israeli sabotage won’t stop Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Only the nuclear deal can do that., site of *The Washington Post* newspaper, Washington, 12/4/2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/04/12/nuclear-deal-is-only-way-restrain-irans-nuclear-ambitions>
- <sup>20</sup> Rosa Brooks, Shadow Wars, site of *Foreign Policy* magazine, Washington, 20/9/2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/20/shadow-wars>

