

ISRAEL-IRAN NUCLEAR CONTESTATION AND NARRATIVE OF EXISTENTIAL THREAT

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ABSTRACT

The entrenched rivalry between Israel and Iran has evolved into one of the most volatile fault lines in the Middle Eastern geopolitics. At its core lies the mutual invocation of existential threat, an emotionally charged narrative that both states deploy to justify military aggression and nuclear politics. This study interrogates the Israel-Iran nuclear armament contestations through the lens of Nuclear Deterrence Theory by Bernard Brodie (1946). Adopting a qualitative research design and employing a secondary method of data collection, the study draws from scholarly works, policy documents, intelligence reports, official statements, and reports of reputable media sources. Through content analysis, it critically examines how both Israel and Iran construct and deploy narratives of existential threat to justify their nuclear postures, while revealing how these discourses intersect with asymmetries embedded in the global non-proliferation regime. The findings reveal that the Israel-Iran nuclear impasse transcends a conventional security dilemma, reflecting a structurally biased international nuclear order. Israel's opaque nuclear arsenal, shielded by U.S. patronage and exempted from non-proliferation scrutiny, starkly contrasts with Iran's treaty-bound yet disproportionately sanctioned nuclear activities. This asymmetry fosters an environment where nuclear deterrence is monopolised rather than reciprocal, fuelling regional instability and incentivising nuclear latency. The study concludes that existential threat narratives, strategically invoked by both states, entrench distrust and securitisation, inhibiting meaningful diplomatic engagement. Consequently, the study recommended among others for the establishment of a universal accountability mechanism under a reformed IAEA or UN-based framework to address enforcement disparities.

Key words: Israel, Iran, nuclear deterrence, existential threat, non-proliferation

INTRODUCTION

The rivalry between Israel and Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 represents one of the most entrenched and volatile rivalries in the contemporary Middle East. Following the Islamic

Revolution of 1979, Iran's once cooperative relationship with Israel under the Shah dynasty, shifted dramatically to hostile antagonism, particularly with regards to issues of nuclear governance (Simon, 2016; NextIAS, 2025; The Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2025). While Israel perceives a nuclear Iran as an existential threat to its national survival, Iran, in turn, frames its recent nuclear ambitions as a rational deterrent to long-standing regime change pressures and military aggression from Israel and its Western allies (The Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2025). The narrative of existential threat thus serves as both a rhetorical and strategic device for both states, transforming nuclear armament into a high-stakes contest with regional and international repercussions.

The rivalry between Israel and Iran deepened as Tehran's nuclear programme advanced, particularly after the exposure of covert enrichment facilities in the early 2000s. Israeli leaders, notably Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, had equated Iranian nuclear programme with a second Holocaust, thus framing pre-emptive containment as a moral imperative, a stance reinforced by American hardliners (Rogers, 2009; Beres, 2024; Landay, 2025). Thus, to counter what it considers as an existential threat, Israel had continued to adopt the combination of covert sabotage, (involving assassinations of top Iranian security officials and scientists) to persistent lobbying for international sanctions and, increasingly, direct military threats (Rogers, 2009; The Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2025).

Diplomatic efforts to address the security concerns regarding Iran's nuclear programme, particularly the signing of the Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) under President Obama in 2015, which offered a framework for curbing Iran's uranium enrichment and ensure international oversight of its nuclear programme in exchange for sanction relief has not yielded the stability expected in the Middle East. The Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, largely influenced by Israel, undermined diplomatic channels and further heightened hostilities between Tel Aviv and Tehran, and the entire Middle East region (Psaropoulos, 2025). The situation reached unprecedented levels of confrontation with Israel's June 13, 2025 "Rising Lion" attack on Iran, targeting nuclear sites and facilities and high-ranking military officials. Iran's response Operation "True Promise 3", involving a significant missile and drone strike on Israeli cities, demonstrated not only Tehran's retaliatory capacity but also the increasingly blurred line between conventional war and nuclear deterrence (The Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2025). U.S. military involvement, marked by airstrikes and contradictory diplomatic posturing, has further complicated the effectiveness of diplomacy in the conflict. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to critically examine how existential threat narratives are constructed, instrumentalised, and contested within the Israel-Iran dyad, and how these narratives interact with broader structural inequalities in the global nuclear architecture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Israel-Iran nuclear contestation is one of the most enduring and dangerous rivalries in contemporary international politics. Scholarly examinations of this dynamic consistently centre on the strategic, ideological, and psychological dimensions of the conflict, often mediated through the narrative of existential threat. Historically, as noted by NextIAS (2025) and Simon (2016), Israel and Iran once maintained cordial relations, particularly under the Shah's regime, bound by shared strategic interests. However, the 1979 Islamic Revolution catalysed a shift towards hostility, transforming the alliance into an adversarial rivalry. Iran's new theocratic regime adopted an anti-Zionist stance rooted in revolutionary ideology, leading to support for armed groups opposed to Israel. This ideological foundation has been critical to the evolving threat perception, laying the groundwork for future nuclear tensions.

Tensions over Iran's nuclear programme represent a flashpoint within this rivalry. According to Rogers (2009), Israel perceives Iran's nuclear progress not simply as a regional threat but as an existential one, thereby justifying its readiness for unilateral military action. This perception is mirrored in Israeli strategic doctrine, which prioritises preventive measures over reactive ones, even in the face of American caution. The argument is developed further by The Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (2025), which details Israel's campaign of assassinations and sabotage as part of a broader strategy to dismantle Iran's nuclear infrastructure. The return of aggressive Israeli leadership, notably under Prime Minister Netanyahu, and fluctuating U.S. postures towards Iran, from Obama's diplomacy to Trump's coercion, underscore the extent to which Israeli anxieties dictate a unique trajectory in regional nuclear politics.

Yet scholars like Nader (2013) and Kahl, Dalton and Irvine (2012) introduce a contrasting perspective that challenges the irrationality thesis often assigned to Iran. Nader posits that Iran's nuclear ambition is primarily defensive, aimed at deterring perceived Western and Israeli aggression. In this view, Tehran's opposition to Israel is ideological but strategic, leveraging anti-Zionist rhetoric to rally domestic support and influence Arab constituencies. Kahl, Dalton and Irvine (2012) reinforce this by arguing that Iran, despite its ideological fervour, has historically behaved as a rational actor, particularly when regime survival is at stake. The authors illustrate how Iran has de-escalated during critical moments, such as accepting ceasefires or suspending enrichment, thereby challenging the premise that Iran would act irrationally with nuclear weapons. This scholarship compels a reevaluation of the existential threat narrative, suggesting that deterrence may be more stable than Israeli narratives allow.

Nevertheless, the threat perception in Israel is deeply embedded in psychological and sociopolitical constructs. Simon (2016) articulates how the notion of existential threat transcends military logic, tapping into the historical trauma of Jewish persecution and the Holocaust. Iranian rhetoric, particularly under President Ahmadinejad, has reinforced this fear, even if not matched by actual capability. The existential dimension is thus not purely about a nuclear strike but about the strategic consequences of a nuclear Iran: regional embodiment, deterrence erosion, and demographic shifts as Israelis emigrate under nuclear shadow. This fear is captured poignantly by Beres (2024), who

frames the Israeli imperative to act pre-emptively as a matter of moral and strategic necessity. Beres's advocacy for anticipatory self-defence reflects the weight that existential framing carries in Israeli strategic thought.

However, legal and technical debates continue to animate the discussion. Landau (2023; 2013) provides detailed analysis of Iran's nuclear trajectory, noting credible evidence of weapons-related activity, including missile development and uranium enrichment. While acknowledging the absence of direct proof of bomb assembly, Landau argues that Iran's non-compliance with IAEA inspections and NPT obligations heightens Israeli insecurities. Importantly, Landau highlights Israel's diplomatic isolation from formal enforcement processes, which fuels its perception of abandonment and justifies unilateralism. This isolation, combined with U.S. inconsistency, most notably the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA, has further reinforced Israel's sense of urgency. Meanwhile, Kim (2024) outlines the economic dimension, explaining how sanctions and diplomatic isolation have been key levers in both Israeli and American strategies. Yet their effectiveness in halting Iran's nuclear ambitions remains inconclusive, reinforcing the perception that military solutions may become inevitable.

Lastly, the question of actual nuclear use is nuanced in the works of Karkazis, Anastasiadou and Markopoulos (2024), who argue that a first-strike by Iran is implausible, given the certainty of catastrophic retaliation. They suggest that Iran's nuclear ambition is better understood as a political tool rather than a war fighting option, particularly considering internal divides between its political and military leadership. This analytical thread aligns with Kahl, Dalton and Irvine (2012), who caution against overestimating crisis instability. They draw from Cold War analogies to argue that nuclear-armed rivals often avoid direct confrontation due to the risk of mutual destruction. Instead, the real danger lies in misperceptions and proxy conflicts, which could escalate unintentionally. Thus, nuclearisation does not necessarily imply irrationality or inevitability of war, but rather a new phase of strategic competition fraught with uncertainty.

In conclusion, the academic perspectives reveal a deeply entrenched cycle of mutual suspicion, strategic manoeuvring, and ideological entrenchment between Israel and Iran. While Israel frames the Iranian nuclear programme as an existential threat demanding pre-emptive action, a growing body of scholarship counters that Iran's behaviour, though adversarial, remains grounded in strategic rationality. The existential narrative, while politically potent in Israel, may risk exaggerating the likelihood of irrational Iranian aggression. Thus, the Israel-Iran nuclear contest is less about imminent annihilation and more about regional hegemony, identity politics, and international norms.

A Historical Overview of Israel and Iran's Nuclear Programmes

The historical trajectories of Israel and Iran's nuclear programmes offer distinct yet deeply intertwined narratives shaped by geopolitical, ideological, and strategic imperatives. Israel's development of nuclear capabilities has been characterised by an entrenched policy of strategic ambiguity, allowing it to operate beneath the thresholds of global non-proliferation norms without formally acknowledging its nuclear arsenal. This policy, rooted in the trauma of the Holocaust and shaped by the existential anxieties of a small state in a hostile regional environment, has been pivotal in deterring aggression from neighbouring Arab states (BenLevi, 2022; Zaman, 2016). The foundational years of Israel's nuclear programme were enabled by crucial alliances, particularly with France and the United States during the Cold War, where anti-Soviet sentiments aligned with Israeli interests. The 1956 secret agreement with France post-Suez Crisis and clandestine operations such as the NUMEC and Plumbat Affairs exemplify the covert and often controversial methods by which Israel secured nuclear material and technology (Gilinsky et al., 2014; Zaman, 2016). Thus, Israel's nuclear development cannot be seen in isolation from the broader strategic imperatives of Cold War realpolitik.

In contrast, Iran's nuclear aspirations emerged through a publicly civil and internationally supported framework under the Shah's regime, reflective of Western-sponsored modernisation. The 1957 U.S.-Iran Agreement for Cooperation Concerning Civil Uses of Atoms, part of President Eisenhower's "Atoms for Peace" initiative, initiated Iran's engagement with nuclear technology within a regulated, non-military framework (Huang, 2016). However, the 1979 Islamic Revolution marked a radical rupture in Iran's nuclear path. Khomeini's denunciation of the Shah's Westernised ambitions, combined with the ensuing Iran-Iraq War, forced Tehran to re-evaluate the strategic utility of nuclear technology. This led to renewed covert efforts to revitalise its programme, albeit now within a context of international suspicion and technological isolation. Iran's subsequent engagement with states such as Pakistan and China reflects a pragmatic pivot to the East, away from erstwhile Western partnerships (Kibaroglu, 2007; Vaziri, 1986). Unlike Israel, however, Iran's nuclear programme has remained mired in controversy, largely due to its concealment of enrichment facilities, its anti-Western rhetoric, and the perceived opacity of its nuclear intentions.

While Israel's nuclear policy has been undergirded by deterrence doctrine and strategic ambiguity, Iran's journey has been shaped by cyclical engagement and confrontation with global nuclear governance mechanisms, particularly the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of nuclear weapons (NPT). Israel's refusal to sign the NPT underscores its desire to remain outside formal international scrutiny, whereas Iran, as a signatory, has had to navigate a complex compliance landscape fraught with accusations of subterfuge and non-compliance. The contrast is further sharpened by the differing perceptions of legitimacy afforded to both states. Israel, backed consistently by the United States and tacitly accepted by Western powers, has retained its ambiguous status with little diplomatic consequence. In contrast, Iran's nuclear advancements have triggered a cascade of sanctions, military threats, and diplomatic negotiations, most notably the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which sought to limit its enrichment capacity in exchange for sanctions

relief (Bazoobandi, 2020; Cordesman, 2000). The differential treatment exposes the normative biases within the global nuclear order and raises critical questions about the equity and efficacy of non-proliferation regimes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Nuclear Deterrence Theory. The theory articulated by Bernard Brodie in 1946, emerged in response to the unprecedented destructive capacity of nuclear weapons. Brodie, often considered the father of nuclear strategy, argued that the primary purpose of a nuclear arsenal is not to fight wars but to prevent them. Central to the theory are the principles of credible threat and assured retaliation, the idea that the sheer scale of destruction promised by nuclear response deters adversaries from initiating conflict. Later scholars like Thomas Schelling (1960) and Albert Wohlstetter (1959) expanded the theory, emphasizing the psychological dimensions of deterrence, where the perception of willingness and capability to retaliate becomes as vital as actual force. This foundational logic shaped Cold War strategy, driving the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) and informing global nuclear policy throughout the 20th century and present 21st century.

Analysing this study through the lens of Nuclear Deterrence Theory, the existential threat narratives between Israel and Iran, highlights how perceptions of security and survival are shaped not only by material capabilities but also by psychological and ideological constructs. This is why both states strategically frame one another as existential threats to justify their respective security postures. Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities as a deterrent against Israel's undeclared nuclear arsenal, and Israel's narrative of pre-emptive defense rooted in historical vulnerability are not merely reactive but are actively instrumentalised to garner international support, legitimize military readiness, and challenge or uphold the structural asymmetries embedded in the global nuclear order. In doing so, they reveal the limitations of traditional deterrence models in addressing unequal access to nuclear legitimacy and the complex interplay between regional rivalries and global non-proliferation norms.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design, utilising a secondary method of data collection to explore the Israel-Iran nuclear arm contestations and the embedded narrative of existential threat. Data were sourced from a wide range of scholarly publications, policy documents, government statements, intelligence reports, and reputable media coverage to ensure a comprehensive and triangulated understanding of the subject matter. The analysis employed content analysis as the core methodological approach, enabling a systematic examination of textual data to identify patterns, themes, and discursive framings surrounding nuclear deterrence, ideological posturing, and threat perceptions. This approach allowed for an in-depth interrogation of how existential threat narratives are constructed and operationalised in policy and media discourse, and how these narratives intersect with the legal asymmetries inherent in the global non-proliferation regime.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Israel-Iran Nuclear Rivalry and the Paradox of Deterrence

The enduring contestation between Israel and Iran over nuclear capabilities encapsulates a complex interplay of historical trauma, strategic insecurity, and competing narratives of existential threat. At its core lies a paradox of deterrence. Thus, examining the rationale behind Israel's objection to Iran's nuclear programme and Iran's justification of its pursuit of nuclear armament is key in achieving meaningful deterrence.

A. Israel's Strategic Concerns over Iran's Nuclear Programme

Israel's concern over Iran's nuclear programme is deeply rooted in its historical experiences and security doctrines, particularly the policy of *Amimut* (strategic ambiguity), which serves as both deterrent and shield. This posture reflects Israel's existential anxieties shaped by the Holocaust and persistent threats from its regional environment (BenLevi, 2022). The fear that a nuclear-armed Iran could undermine Israel's deterrence capability is compounded by the perception that Tehran views Israel as an illegitimate state that must be opposed. While Iran insists its nuclear ambitions are peaceful, Israel do not believe such as it continues to refer to a critical but often misunderstood statement made by former Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani during his December 14, 2001, Friday prayer sermon (Nader, 2013). Rafsanjani asserted that if the Islamic world were ever equipped with nuclear weapons like Israel, the balance of power would shift dramatically, warning that even a single nuclear bomb could annihilate Israel, while the Islamic world would only be "harmed" (Nader, 2013). Though this quote has frequently been cited by Western analysts and Israeli leaders, such as Netanyahu, as not only existentially threatening, but an evidence of Iran's potential willingness to absorb retaliatory nuclear strikes in pursuit of Israel's destruction, there is no doubt that Rafsanjani's intention was likely misinterpreted, as it rather indicates a belief in mutual deterrence and not suicidal aggression (Nadar, 2013). This interpretation aligns with Rafsanjani's broader pragmatic stance, particularly in his 2012 television interview where he stated that having nuclear weapons is not even in Israel's interest (Kahl, Dalton & Irvine, 2012),

Further, Israel believes that Iran's support for proxy groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah is not merely ideological but strategic, aimed at undermining Israeli security and entrenching Iranian influence near its borders. The 2005 Israeli disengagement from Gaza, originally intended to foster peace, instead gave rise to Hamas' political and military dominance in the Strip, with Iran becoming a primary backer (Amon, 2007). Subsequent escalations, most notably the October 7 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, are seen in Jerusalem as extensions of Iranian aggression by other means (Levin, 2023; Bordas, 2024). These developments are particularly worrisome for Israel, as they indicate that Iran is not only building conventional power in its immediate proxies but potentially preparing the ground for a broader strategic confrontation that could include nuclear blackmail. The alignment of ideological hostility with concrete military support to non-state actors thus reinforces Israel's belief that Iran's nuclear ambitions are not merely defensive but part of a wider offensive strategy.

The integration of Hezbollah into Iran's regional calculus adds another layer to Israel's fears. As Byman and Jones (2024) argue, Hezbollah's military sophistication and its ideological commitment to the "resistance axis" make it a formidable threat. The group's evolving capabilities, including its extensive missile arsenal and combat experience; enhance its potential to be a launchpad for Iranian retaliatory or pre-emptive strategies. Events like the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran in 2024 and the retaliatory Iranian strikes illustrate the growing proximity of indirect hostilities to open warfare (Fassihi, 2024). This dynamic heightens Israel's anxiety, particularly when Hezbollah's activities are seen as coordinated with Iranian nuclear posturing. The spectre of Iran passing nuclear capabilities or even dirty bombs to these actors, intentionally or through breakdowns in command and control, underscores the stakes for Israel, which sees itself increasingly encircled by ideologically motivated and Iranian-armed forces.

Finally, Israel perceives the broader implications of Iranian nuclearisation as destabilising not only for its own security but for the entire Middle East. Iran's nuclear ambitions could trigger a regional arms race, with countries like Saudi Arabia exploring similar deterrents, thereby eroding the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) framework. In this context, Israel's strategy of ambiguity is increasingly under strain, as the qualitative military edge it has long relied on may be diminished. The difficulty of diplomatic engagement is further compounded by Iran's opaque negotiations and the use of non-state actors to destabilise peace efforts. As Sewell (2024) notes, incidents like tit-for-tat strikes between Israel and Iranian targets have become normalized, leaving little room for trust or compromise. In the eyes of Israeli policymakers, therefore, Iran's nuclear programme is not an isolated issue but the linchpin of a multifaceted threat matrix that endangers both the state's survival and regional stability.

B. Deterrence Justification of Iran's Pursuit of Nuclear Capability

Despite opposition to its nuclear weapons programme, Iran's pursuit of nuclear capability can be rationalised by various security concerns that continue to threaten its sovereign existence. Central to these concerns is the hostility it faces from Israel and the United States in the power dynamics of the Middle East.

• Israeli Nuclear Ambiguity vs. Iran's NPT Commitment

The asymmetry in nuclear governance between Iran and Israel constitutes a profound geopolitical and ethical paradox that undermines the legitimacy of global non-proliferation norms. Iran, a signatory to the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of nuclear weapons (NPT) and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) of 2015, has been subject to rigorous international scrutiny and sanctions under suspicion of seeking nuclear weapons. In contrast, Israel, whose nuclear capabilities are widely recognised but never officially acknowledged, remains outside the NPT framework. This disparity is compounded by Israel's clandestine nuclear history, including its likely breach of the Partial Test Ban Treaty and its systematic violations of nuclear material trafficking laws (Borger, 2014). The secrecy surrounding Israel's nuclear programme, rooted in

strategic ambiguity or *Amimut*, allows it to deter existential threats while circumventing international accountability (BenLevi, 2022). The fact that Iran remains formally committed to the NPT and JCPOA, while Israel benefits from strategic ambiguity without adhering to the same legal obligations, challenges the normative fairness of global nuclear governance and arguably legitimises Iran's pursuit of a balanced deterrent posture.

Historically, Israel's nuclear programme has relied heavily on covert operations and foreign complicity. Initiated in 1948 under David Ben-Gurion, Israel received significant support from France and the United States, culminating in the construction of the Dimona reactor through a secret 1956 agreement (Zaman, 2016). The strategic utility of this clandestine armament was evident during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, where France allegedly supplied Israel with enriched uranium and possibly warheads (Zaman, 2016). Moreover, Mossad's involvement in operations such as the NUMEC Affair in 1965 and the Plumbat Affair in 1968 illustrate a systemic pattern of nuclear material procurement outside legitimate channels (Gilinsky & Mattson, 2014; Times, 1977; Zaman, 2016). By contrast, Iran's nuclear programme, despite its Revolutionary regime's ideological posturing, has remained within the confines of IAEA inspections and NPT commitments, though subjected to immense pressure, sabotage, and diplomatic isolation. This double standard presents a compelling rationale for Iran to seek nuclear parity, not as an act of aggression, but as a strategic necessity for regional balance and sovereign deterrence.

The post-Cold War international security architecture has failed to address this regional imbalance adequately, particularly as the United States has reinforced Israel's strategic dominance through bilateral policies that preserve its nuclear opacity (Gavin, 2012; Taliaferro, 2019). This dynamic is evident in Israel's expanding second-strike capabilities, including its acquisition of nuclear-armed submarines and ballistic missile defence systems in the 1990s and early 2000s (Narang, 2014; Rubin, 2008; Sharp, 2022). Netanyahu's advocacy in 2001 for formalising second-strike protocols in response to Iran's nuclear potential further underscores the realpolitik calculus in Israeli strategic planning (Shifer, 2001). Paradoxically, while Israel strengthens its deterrence posture, Iran is denied similar capabilities under the pretext of non-proliferation. This imbalance not only destabilises regional security but undermines the universality and equity of the NPT regime. In this context, Iran's potential nuclearisation could be interpreted not as a violation of international norms, but as a rational pursuit of strategic symmetry in a region where existing deterrent structures are heavily skewed in Israel's favour.

• U.S.-Backed Israeli Aggression Toward Iran

The lopsidedness in regional power politics between Iran and Israel (backed decisively by the United States who first recognized its statehood in 1948), has raised legitimate questions around strategic balance in the Middle East. From a realist international relations perspective, where states prioritise self-preservation and security, the persistent and intensifying Israeli aggression, often supported by direct or indirect U.S. involvement, arguably creates the conditions under which Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities can be interpreted not as a threat, but as a strategic necessity.

Within the broader context of Iran's security anxieties, the scope and scale of United States military and financial support to Israel, coupled with its entrenched presence across the Middle East, reinforce the strategic logic underpinning Iran's pursuit of a nuclear deterrent. Under the terms of a 10-year Memorandum of Understanding (2019–2028), the United States has committed to annually providing Israel \$3.3 billion in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and an additional \$500 million for cooperative missile defence initiatives (Masters & Merrow, 2024; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 2025). These are not symbolic gestures but a core strategic pillar of U.S. foreign policy, which has further materialised in the form of \$3.4 billion in missile defence funding since FY 2009, including \$1.3 billion specifically allocated to support the Iron Dome system from FY 2011 (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 2025). Furthermore, under the Trump administration, nearly \$12 billion in major Foreign Military Sales (FMS) to Israel were approved, with 751 active FMS cases valued at \$39.2 billion as of April 2025 (Rubio, 2025; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 2025).

This overwhelming U.S. military endorsement is bolstered by its extensive regional footprint. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, the U.S. currently maintains between 40,000 and 50,000 troops across at least 19 military sites in the Middle East, eight of which are permanent bases located in Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (Al Jazeera, 2025). These installations effectively encircle Iran, contributing to an inescapable sense of strategic isolation and vulnerability. The convergence of these military arrangements, both in terms of Israel's offensive capabilities and the persistent proximity of U.S. military infrastructure, reinforces a regional security imbalance that leaves Iran with minimal conventional means of ensuring its national security. Within this heavily militarised environment, a nuclear deterrent is arguably Iran's most viable counterbalance, not to initiate aggression, but to dissuade it through a policy of assured retaliation.

Further, Israel's pattern of covert and overt military actions against Iranian interests demonstrates a consistent violation of Iran's sovereignty, contributing to a security climate where Iran may rationally perceive existential threats. Since 2019, Israel has expanded its shadow war against Iran beyond Syria, launching strikes in Iraq and Lebanon against Iranian proxies (Halbfinger, Hubbard & Bergman, 2019). Notably, the 2020 assassination of Iran's top nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh and the earlier killing of Quds Force commander Qassim Suleimani, both targeted killings carried out with tacit or direct American involvement, underscore a new norm of extrajudicial executions targeting Iran's security leadership (Sanger, Schmitt, Fassihi, & Bergman, 2020; Halbfinger et al. 2019). These actions are framed as preemptive self-defence by Israel and the U.S., yet they constitute acts of aggression under international law. Though Iran's claim that its nuclear programme is peaceful has not been independently disproven, however, its moves towards nuclear capability could be interpreted as part of a deterrence doctrine, designed to prevent further unilateral attacks from Israel with the support of the United States and to balance the unreciprocated aggressiveness of an adversarial dyad.

Recent years have witnessed a dangerous escalation, culminating in direct Israeli strikes on Iranian diplomatic infrastructure and nuclear facilities. In August 2019, Israel markedly escalated its long-running shadow war against Iran by launching coordinated airstrikes across Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, targeting Iran's efforts to supply Hezbollah and other regional proxies with precision-guided weaponry, a shift that broke previous tacit rules of engagement and increased the risk of wider conflict (Halbfinger, Hubbard, and Bergman, 2019). These operations reflected a strategic recalibration in Israeli defence doctrine, now asserting a more proactive and extraterritorial stance against Iranian influence in the region. Iran, while denying direct involvement, continued bolstering its proxies, prompting heightened rhetoric and retaliatory threats from Iranian officials, including Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, who condemned Israeli aggression as "insane" and vowed a decisive response (Halbfinger, Hubbard, and Bergman, 2019).

Concurrently, Israel expanded its operational theatre to maritime routes, targeting Iranian ships in the eastern Mediterranean and Red Seas suspected of transporting oil and weaponry (Livni, Vinograd, and Sampson, 2025). The hostilities reached a new level in November 2020 when Israel assassinated Mohsen Fakhriadeh, Iran's top nuclear scientist, using a remote-controlled weapon, only months after the U.S. eliminated Quds Force commander Suleimani in a drone strike. Both assassinations struck at the heart of Iran's strategic command and were condemned by Iranian authorities as acts of terrorism and warmongering designed to derail Iran's sovereign right to scientific advancement under the guise of non-proliferation concerns (Halbfinger, Hubbard, and Bergman, 2019; Sanger et al., 2020). In April 2024, Israel bombed an Iranian embassy building in Damascus, killing key Iranian commanders, and later in June 2024, unilaterally attacked Iran's nuclear sites in Tehran (Halbfinger, Hubbard, and Bergman, 2019; Al Jazeera, 2025). These preemptive strikes were undertaken without direct provocation and occurred in the context of Iranian denials of involvement in the October 7 Hamas attacks. Despite Iran's consistent denial of involvement, Israel expanded its campaign by assassinating Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran in July and Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah in September (Halbfinger, Hubbard, and Bergman, 2019). Such targeted assassinations not only escalated tensions but reinforced the perception that Iran is the subject of a concerted military and intelligence campaign. Iran's retaliatory missile attacks, though largely intercepted, signify a reactive and not initiatory military posture. In the absence of a credible nuclear deterrent, Iran remains strategically vulnerable to these continued violations of sovereignty and selective international norms.

The U.S. and Israeli joint strike on Iran's nuclear facilities in June 2025, conducted without conclusive evidence of nuclear weaponisation or IAEA validation, represents a breach of Iran's right to sovereign development under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) framework (Al Jazeera, 2025). The destruction of civilian infrastructure, deaths of nuclear scientists, and Iran's subsequent suspension of cooperation with the IAEA reflect a breakdown of multilateral arms control mechanisms. This triggered a retaliatory attack by Iran. Therefore, a nuclear deterrent could function as a stabilising mechanism, aligning with the logic of mutually assured destruction that

prevented nuclear conflict during the Cold War. Given the deeply entrenched U.S.-Israel security partnership and the disproportionate conventional capabilities enjoyed by Israel, Iran's pursuit of nuclear armament can be viewed as a strategic imperative to restore balance, ensure national sovereignty, and prevent further erosion of regional stability under a one-sided security paradigm.

• U.S. and Israeli Pursuits of Regime Change in Iran

The persistent geopolitical hostilities directed at the Islamic Republic of Iran by both Israel and the United States have provided fertile ground for Tehran's strategic re-evaluation of its nuclear doctrine. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution that toppled the pro-Western Shah regime, Iran has been subjected to long-standing efforts at regime change spearheaded by Washington and supported by Tel Aviv (Frykberg, 2025). A critical moment came in 1996 with the publication of the policy document *A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm*, which was presented to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This neoconservative manifesto, authored by Richard Perle and others, outlined a sequential plan of regime change in the Middle East, ultimately culminating in the overthrow of the Iranian regime (Frykberg, 2025). The U.S.-led invasions of Iraq in 2003 and Libya by NATO in 2011 were initial enactments of this broader imperial strategy. As such, Iran's revolutionary leadership views its national sovereignty and regional position as perpetually under threat from an externally imposed political reconfiguration, making deterrence a rational rather than ideological posture.

The historical precedent set by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 under the pretext of Saddam Hussein's supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction remains instructive. Despite internal Israeli intelligence officials such as Yossi Sarid and Ehud Yatom, and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, recognising the WMD claims as unfounded, Israel encouraged the United States' military action in Iraq (Associated Press, 2004). This manipulation of intelligence significantly eroded international trust and legitimised, in the eyes of many in the Global South, the rationale for states like Iran to seek formidable deterrence strategies. Iran's missile and drone response to Israel's April 2024 bombing of its consulate in Damascus was a clear demonstration of Iran's shift toward retaliatory capabilities (Azizi, 2024). Statements by Iranian officials such as Kamal Kharrazi and General Ahmad Haqtaab indicate a critical doctrinal evolution, while Iran maintains it has no intention to produce nuclear weapons, it reserves the right to revise that stance should its sovereignty be existentially threatened (Azizi, 2024). This position finds further legitimacy in international relations theory, particularly the realist perspective, which underscores state survival as the primary concern in an anarchic international system.

The legitimacy of Iranian fears is compounded by recent Israeli and American escalations. Notably, Israel's strikes on Iranian nuclear and military facilities in 2025, with full backing from Washington, eliminated senior officials including IRGC chief Hossein Salami, even as nuclear negotiations were underway in Qatar (Nashed, 2025). This preemptive aggression, unsubstantiated by clear IAEA or U.S. intelligence confirming Iran's enrichment breach, reveals a profound asymmetry in security expectations and enforcement. Simultaneously, internal rhetoric from U.S.

political figures such as Donald Trump openly advocating for regime change under slogans like “MIGA – Make Iran Great Again,” despite contradictory official statements from U.S. defence leaders, underscores the ideological inconsistency yet strategic continuity in American foreign policy toward Iran (Holmes, 2025). The discrepancy between public denials of regime change goals and military actions targeting the core of Iran’s defence infrastructure offers Tehran an empirical basis for reinterpreting its strategic environment through the lens of deterrence necessity rather than ideological posturing.

Iran’s evolving nuclear calculus must also be contextualised within its broader defence doctrine. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Tehran has increasingly emphasised deterrence (*bazdarandegi*) as central to its security posture (Eslami, 2024). The combination of a comprehensive encirclement by U.S. military bases and the constant threat perception instilled by wars in the region has led Iran to bolster its asymmetric “mosaic defence” strategy and missile programmes. These capabilities have been paralleled by advancements in uranium enrichment, which, although not yet culminating in weaponisation, serve as a latent deterrent against existential threats (Eslami, 2024). As Hunter (2004) astutely notes, while Iran’s nuclear ambitions may instill insecurity in other actors, a failure to appreciate the objective threats that prompt such policies is a grave oversight in U.S. foreign policy. Rather than dismissing Iran’s concerns as aggressive revisionism, a balanced perspective would recognise the state’s pursuit of nuclear deterrence as a response to a persistent external campaign to dismantle its political order. In this context, nuclear armament emerges not as a rogue ambition but as a sovereign reaction to an entrenched regime-change doctrine that has already devastated neighbouring states.

- **U.S. Nuclear Precedent and Erratic Behaviour of Current US Leadership Towards Iran**

The historical precedent set by the United States' use of nuclear weapons against Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 continues to cast a long shadow over global nuclear politics. These bombings, which resulted in the immediate deaths of thousands of civilians, were rationalised by the U.S. as a necessary act to expedite Japan’s surrender in World War II. Yet, this act introduced a dangerous precedent: the use of nuclear weapons by a superpower against a non-nuclear adversary (Jan, 2025). This imbalance persists today. The United States, along with other nuclear-armed states, maintains a de facto monopoly on nuclear force, thereby shaping international relations from a position of unchallenged strength. For Iran, a nation long demonised in Western narratives, this asymmetry is both a strategic liability and an existential threat. Iran's desire for nuclear capability cannot be disentangled from the historical memory of the 1945 bombings and the persistent threat of U.S. and Israeli military aggression, which creates a compelling rationale for Tehran to seek parity through nuclear deterrence.

The radical character of the current US leadership headed by President Donald Trump, which was responsible for the abrogation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 is a serious concern considering America’s precedent in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Trump abandonment of the JCOP signed under President Barack Obama in 2015, to ensure that Iran's uranium

enrichment remained strictly at civilian levels, with comprehensive oversight by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), fundamentally undermined a diplomatic framework that had successfully contained Iran's nuclear activities (Psaropoulos, 2025). Obama's approach reflected an understanding that military solutions to Iran's nuclear programme were neither feasible nor desirable. However, Trump's withdrawal, reportedly under pressure from Israel, reopened the space for military confrontation, setting the stage for renewed hostilities and eroding Iran's trust in multilateral diplomacy (Psaropoulos, 2025).

Trump's later actions, including tacit and overt support for Israeli airstrikes on Iranian nuclear facilities in June 2025, demonstrate how erratic leadership can destabilise delicate geopolitical balances. His public contradiction of U.S. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard, who had verified that Iran was not pursuing a nuclear weapon, further underscores the danger of politicised intelligence assessments (Landay, 2025). This sets a precedent where a nuclear-armed state might justify pre-emptive nuclear or conventional strikes based on manipulated claims.

The logic of nuclear deterrence becomes particularly salient considering Trump's aggressive rhetoric and military posturing. On 21 June 2025, he authorised direct airstrikes on Iranian nuclear sites, including Fordow, Natanz, and Esfahan, using B-2 bombers, an act marking overt U.S. involvement in hostilities (Moore & Pratz, 2025). This move followed a series of contradictory statements, including threats of evacuation in Tehran and suggestions of diplomatic engagement, revealing the unpredictability of the U.S. administration (Psaropoulos, 2025). Such volatility further validates Iranian fears that a future nuclear strike, justified on false intelligence or strategic miscalculation, remains a possibility. From Iran's vantage point, possessing nuclear weapons would introduce a vital counterbalance, deterring not only unilateral Israeli strikes but also coercive U.S. actions that disregard verified intelligence or international consensus. As Jan (2025) notes, nuclear deterrence operates on the principle of mutual vulnerability, a principle Iran currently lacks in its dealings with nuclear-armed states.

The case of North Korea offers a clear, if uncomfortable, analogy. Despite its pariah status, Pyongyang's acquisition of nuclear weapons has shielded it from external military intervention. For Iran, this example reinforces the pragmatic argument for pursuing a nuclear deterrent, particularly as diplomatic avenues continue to be undermined by unilateral actions and shifting political agendas in Washington (Jan, 2025). Without confirmed nuclear capabilities, Iran remains susceptible to pre-emptive strikes and regime-change ambitions, especially under leadership such as Trump's, which has demonstrated willingness to flout international norms. In this context, Iranian nuclear armament is not merely an aggressive posture but a strategic imperative aimed at ensuring survival and parity. It offers Iran the potential to engage in nuclear diplomacy as an equal, rather than a perpetual target of suspicion and aggression, to avoid being another victim of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki experience.

The Moral and Legal Need for a Balanced Nuclear Deterrence

The Israel-Iran nuclear rivalry presents a compelling case for reassessing the moral and legal underpinnings of nuclear deterrence, especially within asymmetric geopolitical frameworks. At the heart of this dilemma lies the paradox of possessing weapons that must never be used, yet whose very existence is justified by their purported role in preventing war. This paradox becomes even more pronounced in asymmetrical security environments such as the Israel-Iran rivalry, where one actor (Israel) maintains strategic opacity outside the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), while the other (Iran) remains a signatory under intense scrutiny. From a moral standpoint, a balanced deterrence is necessitated not by an endorsement of proliferation but by the need to rectify structural inequities in nuclear governance. Walzer (2006) argues that the moral legitimacy of deterrence must be anchored in mutual restraint and proportionality. In this light, the absence of parity, where Israel is tacitly permitted nuclear arms while Iran is denied even latent capability, undermines both ethical and strategic stability. Deterrence, to be morally defensible, must not function as an instrument of permanent subjugation for less powerful states, but rather as a framework that recognises reciprocal security concerns.

Legally, the doctrine of balanced deterrence finds resonance in the principles of sovereign equality and non-discrimination enshrined in the UN Charter and the NPT. The selective application of nuclear non-proliferation norms, where Israel's unacknowledged arsenal is overlooked while Iran's suspected ambitions are met with sanctions and sabotage, constitutes a breach of international legal consistency. According to Joyner et al. (2020), this double standard not only delegitimises the non-proliferation regime but also incentivises clandestine nuclear development among states that perceive themselves as existentially threatened. The principle of *pacta sunt servanda*, that agreements must be respected, loses normative force when states like the U.S. arbitrarily abandon multilateral agreements such as the JCPOA. The resulting legal asymmetry corrodes the trust necessary for any sustainable arms control mechanism. A balanced deterrence, therefore, entails a legal recalibration whereby all nuclear-armed states, declared or undeclared, are held to uniform standards of transparency, verification, and disarmament under international law.

Critically, the practical necessity of balanced deterrence transcends ideological binaries and reflects a realist logic of survival in an anarchic international system. As scholars such as Waltz (2012) have provocatively argued, the spread of nuclear weapon, under strict and accountable conditions, may enhance stability by making war less likely due to the high costs involved. While such a view remains controversial, its underlying premise underscores the limitations of unipolar deterrence models, especially when these models are enforced through coercion rather than consent. In the Israel-Iran context, the entrenchment of unbalanced deterrence has only exacerbated proxy conflicts, escalated arms races, and deepened regional insecurity. As Byman et al. (2024) note, the entwinement of nuclear asymmetry with ideological hostility fuels a perpetual state of near-conflict. Only through a reimagined deterrence framework, one that is morally

reciprocal, legally equitable, and strategically stabilizing, can the Middle East avert the catastrophic consequences of nuclear miscalculation. In sum, balanced nuclear deterrence is not merely a strategic imperative but a moral and legal necessity in an increasingly fragmented global order.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Israel-Iran nuclear contest is not merely a bilateral security dilemma but a reflection of broader structural biases embedded within the global nuclear order. Israel's possession of nuclear weapons under the veil of strategic ambiguity, backed by consistent U.S. support and impunity from international law, contrasts starkly with Iran's heavily scrutinised, treaty-bound nuclear programme. This lopsidedness fosters a system where deterrence is monopolised rather than mutual, reinforcing regional instability and incentivising nuclear latency among states that perceive themselves as existentially threatened. The invocation of existential threat narratives by both Israel and Iran has thus served as both strategic rationale and political discourse, further complicating diplomatic resolution and entrenching a cycle of distrust, pre-emption, and securitisation. Thus, a morally credible and legally consistent non-proliferation regime must address not only the material dimensions of nuclear capability but also the normative disparities in how deterrence is legitimised or delegitimised.

Given the findings, it is recommended that to address the double standards in the global nuclear order, a universally applicable accountability mechanism should be established under the IAEA or a reformed UN-based oversight body, with independent oversight over all nuclear-armed states, including de facto ones like Israel. This measure will counter any form of selective enforcement, thereby enhancing transparency and trust.

Also, unlike the failed 2010 Middle East WMD-Free Zone initiative, there is need to initiate a regional Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (NWFZ) negotiations involving all Middle East states, including Israel and Iran, and nuclear powers (e.g., the P5), to address nuclear norms, transparency, and regional deterrence postures.

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