

---

## The Nuclear (and the) Holocaust: Israel, Iran, and the Shadows of Auschwitz

Shmuel Nili  
*University of Notre Dame, Shmuel.nili@yale.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss>

 Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#), [National Security Law Commons](#), and the [Portfolio and Security Analysis Commons](#)  
pp. 37-56

---

### Recommended Citation

Nili, Shmuel. "The Nuclear (and the) Holocaust: Israel, Iran, and the Shadows of Auschwitz." *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 1 (2011) : 37-56.  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.4.1.3>  
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol4/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Strategic Security* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [scholarcommons@usf.edu](mailto:scholarcommons@usf.edu).

---

## **The Nuclear (and the) Holocaust: Israel, Iran, and the Shadows of Auschwitz**

### **Abstract**

The main thesis of this article is that the Holocaust is indispensable for understanding Israel's treatment of what it perceives as the greatest current threat to its security - the Iranian nuclear program. The Holocaust's impact deviates in crucial ways from established teaching regarding balance of power in general and nuclear deterrence in particular. Mutually Assured Destruction, the distinction between capabilities and intentions, and even linkage politics - all of those basic concepts are profoundly altered in the Israeli case by the (often conscious) presence of the Holocaust. The Holocaust's influence is evident in the Israeli belief that deterring Iran might be impossible: MAD does not apply to the Iranians since, like Hitler, their regime is considered mad: its commitment to destructing the "Zionist entity" is understood as trumping any standard realpolitik calculations. This perception of Iran generates the conviction that the Iranian nuclear project must be stopped at all costs: Israel must prepare for the possibility that the Jews will once again be left alone and, if need be, launch a strike against Iran to prevent a potential second Holocaust. There will not be time for "accommodation" to the threat.

# The Nuclear (and the) Holocaust: Israel, Iran, and the Shadows of Auschwitz

**Shmulik Nili**

*University of Notre Dame*  
[snili@nd.edu](mailto:snili@nd.edu)

---

---

## Abstract

The Holocaust stands at the core of Israel's security policy, and especially at the core of Israel's treatment of what it perceives as the greatest current threat to its security—the Iranian nuclear program. The Holocaust fuels the Israeli conviction that deterring Iran might be impossible. This conviction makes it very likely that Israel will be willing to use whatever means necessary to try and stop the Iranian nuclear project, including, if all else fails, a preemptive military strike.

---

---

## Introduction

*We, the Air Force pilots in the sky of the camp of atrocities, have risen from the ashes of the millions of victims, carrying their silent outcry, salute their bravery and promise to be a defender of the Jewish people and its land, Israel.*

— Israeli Air Force Brigadier General Amir Eshel's radio transmission to the ground, Auschwitz, September 4, 2003<sup>1</sup>

This article aims to contribute both to the study of Israeli politics and to deterrence literature. Despite extensive research on Israeli society and government, covering almost every event in the country's short history,

comparatively little scholarly attention has been given to broader processes of Israeli policy formation, and specifically to the Holocaust's impact on these processes.<sup>2</sup> These processes deviate in crucial ways from established teaching regarding balance of power in general and nuclear deterrence in particular. Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), the distinction between capabilities and intentions, and even linkage politics—all of these basic concepts are dramatically altered in the Israeli case by the (often conscious) presence of the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup> The Holocaust's influence is evident in the Israeli belief that deterring Iran might be a doomed strategy: MAD does not apply to the Iranian regime, which is not only engaging in brinkmanship but is also willing to go past the brink in order to achieve a messianic goal that offsets any possible cost. Far from being "merely" a revisionist actor that seeks geopolitical prominence, the Iranian regime is considered by Israeli decision makers a fanatic actor: its commitment to the destruction of the "Zionist entity" is understood as trumping any standard realpolitik calculations.<sup>4</sup> Israel must therefore be prepared to launch a strike against Iran to prevent a potential second Holocaust.

The discussion of this Holocaust-imbued sense of threat is circumscribed in three ways. First, no claim is made as to the empirical accuracy of the Israeli perception of the Iranian menace: what matters is the existence of this perception itself, which, given the tremendous impact of the Holocaust, must be taken into account in any sound prediction of Israeli actions. In addition, unlike many discussions which tend to stress that "policymakers ordinarily use history badly,"<sup>5</sup> no attempt is made here to prescribe policy, the main reason being that one must first adequately understand a phenomenon before judging its merits and weaknesses. Lastly, little comparison is offered with other nuclear deterrence cases, since there is good reason to think that the Israeli case is distinctive. While other countries have shown extraordinary anxiety in the past over nuclear proliferation, Israel is the only state that has struck—already twice—an enemy's nuclear facility, and might very well do so again for a third time.<sup>6</sup>

## Fear and Nuclear — the Holocaust as a Fixed Analogy from Ben Gurion to Begin

The Holocaust's place at the heart of Israeli security policy results from a distinct *analogical process*. Historical analogies are routinely employed by individual and collective agents when confronting new conditions, which are compared to a past situation, retrieved from memory. Standard analogical reasoning requires at least some degree of flexibility: if all new

issues are represented using the same past memory, then the agent is "locked" into the same psychological construct and is unlikely to acknowledge the need for adaptation. Such a cycle characterizes not standard but rather what can be termed a *fixed analogy*. Collective traumas, of which the Holocaust is the quintessential example, are an important source for fixed analogies.<sup>7</sup>

The living influence of the Holocaust as a fixed analogy in Israeli collective consciousness, and specifically in its security doctrine, has been pervasive throughout Israel's short history. "Israeli national security policy," as Chuck Freilich notes, has always "been predicated on a broad national consensus, which holds that Israel faces a realistic threat of genocide, or at a minimum, of politicide."<sup>8</sup> A historical survey of this consensus and its nuclear implications is important as background for discussing the Israeli view of Iran's nuclear plan.

The earliest and most significant example of the Holocaust as a source of a fixed analogy is David Ben Gurion, Israel's founding father, first Prime Minister, and Minister of Defense. Three lessons Ben Gurion deduced from the Holocaust are especially pertinent for understanding the foundations of Israel's security doctrine throughout the decades. The first was *self-reliance*: the Jews must never place on others their hopes for salvation. Ben Gurion, in the words of Shlomo Aronson, perceived the Jews, the Jewish national movement, and the state it built against all odds as "a unique historical phenomenon" which was to remain deeply fragile "for a long time to come."<sup>9</sup> The second lesson was the *absolute necessity of avoiding even a single defeat*: Israel's foes can always bounce back from a loss to fight another day, while Israel does not have such a luxury: each round of warfare must be literally seen as a matter of *collective*, not only individual, *life and death*. Third, the strategic solution to the deep imbalance between Israel and its enemies lies in nuclear deterrence as the best guarantee against a second genocide.

Ben Gurion always remained deeply concerned about Israel's security environment, even given supposedly reassuring circumstances, whether military—such as the success of the 1956 Sinai Campaign—or diplomatic. Though he considered it pivotal to obtain the support and cooperation of great powers, Ben Gurion refused to rely on promises of foreign assistance in the case of an Arab-initiated conflict. When meeting almost any foreign leader, Ben Gurion belabored the catastrophic implications of a surprise attack, with the conclusion that Israel must always prepare for the worst and rely solely on itself. "If Nasser should break Israel's air force," American ambassador Walworth Barbour quoted Ben Gurion, "the war would be over in two days."<sup>10</sup>

This remark captured a key feature not only of Ben Gurion's psyche but also of the national one, as evinced by the fact that the necessity of nuclear deterrence was widely accepted in Israel. Ever since the 1950s, as Avner Cohen emphasizes, "the idea of the nuclear weapons program as a safety net has enjoyed almost total national consensus in Israel."<sup>11</sup> This consensus and the fears that grounded it remained dominant even after Ben Gurion himself had retired from office (for the second and last time) in 1963. The 1967 "waiting period," for example—the three weeks prior to the Six Day War—is etched in Israeli collective memory as a time when the fear of national catastrophe was extraordinarily tangible. Graves were dug for as many as tens of thousands in preparation for the impending battles; Prime Minister Levi Eshkol was perceived as fatally indecisive, and at the height of the crisis stuttered in a crucial radio speech, producing widespread distress. "Those who were born after the war," as Cohen recently recalled, "cannot grasp how profound was the anxiety that took over Israel. Two decades after the end of the Second World War, one generation after the Holocaust, many of Israel's active citizens were themselves survivors." All this took place while the Jewish State was still within the boundaries of the 1949 armistice, which even Israel's most famous foreign minister, the dovish Abba Eban, would later term the confining "Auschwitz borders."<sup>12</sup>

These shadows of the Holocaust disappeared only temporarily with Israel's historical success in 1967 and the euphoria that ensued. Merely six years later, following the surprise Arab invasion of the Yom Kippur War, complacency was abruptly replaced with returning fears of doomsday, captured in the behavior of Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, the hero of the previous victory, who was quoted as declaring the "destruction of the Third Temple." Whether or not their knowledge of Israel's nuclear capabilities pushed the Arabs to limit their war aims, the fact that such destruction did not come about in 1973 was understood as a result of the IDF's recovery, not of any Arab restraint.<sup>13</sup> The notion that even a single defeat could be fatal was as strong as ever. Despite the eventual complete reversal of battlefield conditions in Israel's favor, Israeli public discourse in the post-war period was dominated by the feeling that an irrevocable disaster was only marginally avoided (a feeling evinced by unprecedented protest against the country's political and military leadership).<sup>14</sup>

The corresponding fear that another disaster could be looming was manifest during Menachem Begin's tenure as Prime Minister (1977–1983), as was the Holocaust's psychological presence. Despite signing Israel's peace treaty with Egypt, Begin never put Auschwitz aside. The most important example was his fateful decision to launch an air-strike against the Iraqi nuclear reactor in Osirak (June 1981). Begin explicitly understood the

threat posed by Saddam Hussein in Holocaust-laden terms, as demonstrated most clearly in his declaration that he would "not be the man in whose time there will be a second Holocaust."<sup>15</sup>

However, this similarity between Ben Gurion and Begin, though maintaining the essence of Ben Gurion's Holocaust lessons, was not complete. Begin went beyond these lessons in one significant sense, also pivotal to the current Israeli posture towards Iran. Begin certainly adopted the necessity of self-reliance, as well as the notion that a single defeat in battle would be fatal for the Jewish state. But the combined impact of these two convictions now cast in a different, more skeptical light, Ben Gurion's third Holocaust lesson: the supreme importance of nuclear deterrence. Ben Gurion did not have a nuclear weapon at his disposal; Begin quite clearly did—but he did not consider it reassuring enough. Begin, then, established the view that Israeli nuclear capabilities *cannot* be seen as a sufficient deterrent against regimes whose intentions towards the Jewish state are understood, as a matter of certainty, to be the worst imaginable, just like those of the Nazis towards the Jewish people.<sup>16</sup> The Osirak strike was a direct consequence of this genocidal threat perception, generating the Begin Doctrine: "a clear and unequivocal consequence of the Holocaust," in the words of Arie Naor, Begin's Cabinet secretary, asserting that "*the State of Israel would never allow an enemy country that aspires to destroy it to develop, manufacture or purchase weapons of mass destruction.*"<sup>17</sup>

Following Sadat's peace initiative in the late 1970s, Israel's geopolitical circumstances changed; yet in many ways, the sense of collective threat underlying the Begin Doctrine remained as entrenched as before. Many Israelis have persisted in maintaining that despite the peace with Egypt, and later with Jordan (1994), Israel's security environment is not malleable—that the region's hostility is "so pervasive and extreme as to preclude any ability to materially alter the nation's circumstances through either military or diplomatic means."<sup>18</sup> Many Israelis continue to believe that there is little need for representation of "new" security issues since they are in effect, old: they are all handled using Auschwitz as the "source memory," making threats from different time periods and regimes mesh together into a single menace of politicide. The overriding majority of Israel's public, in Anita Shapira's words, has "seemingly accepted hatred of Jews and hatred of the State of Israel as existing phenomena."<sup>19</sup>

It is important to see why this acceptance and the existential fears resulting from it are *not* simply an echo of the overriding realist concern with survival. Israel's national security considerations cannot be described as operating according to a standard realist calculus. This

calculus, after all, dismisses "emotional belief"—one, as Jonathan Mercer recently put it, "where emotion constitutes and strengthens a belief and which makes possible a generalization about an actor that involves certainty beyond evidence."<sup>20</sup> Such a belief is generally considered by realists an irrational factor that should play no part in national security deliberation.<sup>21</sup> It is hard to think of a stronger emotional belief than the fixed Holocaust analogy.

To evince just how deep is the gap between the realist reading of global politics and the Holocaust-driven Israeli sense of threat, consider, for example, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Israeli view of national existence as inherently fragile has been evident even in the representation of Palestinian threats that cannot possibly be considered as existential in the basic, physical sense of collective survival.<sup>22</sup> Even when not conceiving of Palestinian terrorism as an existential threat in that sense, public opinion has certainly perceived it as endangering Israel's survival as a cohesive and functioning state—"a challenge to the very fabric of its society."<sup>23</sup> Seeing that existential fears are pervasive even in the face of clearly inferior military capabilities, it is little surprising to witness these fears in the context of much more severe security challenges. Rhetoric about the "destruction of the Zionist entity" or "pushing Israel into the sea" has been defining Israel's worst-case scenario for decades regarding all its enemies—from the Egyptians to the Palestinians. It is this fear, as Cohen notes, which was "the original motive for Ben Gurion to pursue nuclear weapons, and it has remained the strongest incentive for Israel to maintain its nuclear weapons program."<sup>24</sup> But when it comes to the Iranians, the Israeli nuclear program is *not* understood as sufficiently deterring.

Here lies the most profound difference between Israeli security conceptions and the traditional realist understanding of nuclear deterrence: Israeli decision making does not accept the realist distinction between capabilities and intentions. Not only capabilities are known; from an Israeli point of view, intentions are always known as well. Millennia of Jewish history, tragically culminating with the Holocaust, are taken as a guarantee of this knowledge. Of course, a realist might respond in Hobbesian spirit that there is little difference between "assuming the worst intentions"—that the other side *might* endanger your survival at any given instance—and claiming to have *certainty* regarding the other's intentions. But there surely is a difference in the case before us. Israeli decision making is based on the unwavering conviction that the desire to destroy the Jewish state is the paramount and overriding interest of its enemies. These enemies therefore cannot be deterred, even by nuclear means, pre-



cisely because of their fanaticism. This is certainly a disturbing fact when it comes to suicide bombers; and, from the Israeli point of view, it is an especially petrifying fact when connected with the messianic intentions of the Ayatollahs' regime in Teheran, to which I now turn.

## The Fixed Holocaust Analogy and the Iranian Bomb

This section has two main purposes: first, to demonstrate the degree to which the fixed Holocaust analogy dominates Israel's perception of Iran's nuclear project; and second, concurrently, to show why Israel might not be satisfied with American assurances of massive retaliation in case of an Iranian strike, or even with its own second strike capability—and why there is therefore a distinct possibility that it will attempt a preemptive strike, despite unprecedented technical difficulties and potential geopolitical implications.

Much of the official Israeli approach to the Iranian nuclear project derives from Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's explosive rhetoric regarding Israel, Zionism, and the Holocaust. In an October 2005 Teheran conference on a "world without Zionism" (which Ahmadinejad himself had convened), for instance, he declared Israel a "disgraceful stain" which must be "wiped off the map,"<sup>25</sup> just as in 2008 he reiterated that the "Zionist Regime" is a "germ of corruption" and "a cancerous tumor" that "should be wiped off the map."<sup>26</sup> Only the most recent statement in such spirit came in June 2010, when, commenting on the Israeli Gaza flotilla raid, Ahmadinejad declared that "The devilish sound of the uncultured Zionists was coming out from their deceit... They were holding up the flag of the devil itself."<sup>27</sup>

Ahmadinejad has also been drawing connections between the "Zionist regime" and the supposed fabrication of the Holocaust. In a June 2009 speech in which he labeled the "Zionist entity" as "the most criminal regime in human history," Ahmadinejad also insisted that the Holocaust is a "great deception."<sup>28</sup> Three months later, Ahmadinejad proclaimed that Israel was created on the basis of "a lie and a mythical claim," and that the Western powers "launched the myth of the Holocaust. They lied, they put on a show and then they support the Jews."<sup>29</sup> These words only echoed Ahmedinjad's broader adoption of anti-Semitic prejudice. Speaking to the UN General Assembly in September 2008, Ahmadinejad exclaimed that Zionists are "acquisitive," "deceitful," and dominate global finance despite their "minuscule" number; and in January 2009 he added:

"Today the Zionists dominate many of the world's centers of power, wealth, and media. Unfortunately, they have ensnared many politicians and parties, and they are plundering the wealth and assets of nations in this way, depriving peoples of their freedoms and destroying their cultures and human values by spreading their nexus of corruption."<sup>30</sup>

In light of this (merely partial) list of speeches, it is hardly surprising that Ahmadinejad's words have been officially condemned by the West throughout his presidency as "totally abhorrent," "blatantly anti-Semitic," and having "no place in civilized political debate."<sup>31</sup>

It is even less surprising that Israel takes Ahmadinejad's threats most literally, first and foremost because of its firm conviction that, just like Nazi Germany, Iran is a *fanatic actor*. Among the numerous Israeli leaders across the political spectrum who have been emphasizing the grave danger posed by Teheran's messianic intentions, Shimon Peres is a highly symbolic example. Currently Israel's President, Peres was one of the initiators of Israel's nuclear program, but has come in recent decades to be considered an icon of the Israeli peace camp. A Nobel Peace Prize laureate following the Oslo Accords (1994), who earlier did all he could to dissuade Begin from striking Iraq,<sup>32</sup> even Peres declared Iran in 2005 "the most dangerous country around, because the mullahs believe their religion is superior, not unlike Hitler believing the Aryan race superior."<sup>33</sup>

No other Israeli leader, however, treats Iran in Holocaust terms more than Israel's current Prime Minister, Binyamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu's 2009 speech to the UN General Assembly is a particularly important example. Its repeated connections between the Second World War and the Ayatollahs' regime indicate the lasting dominance of the Holocaust analogy in Israeli consciousness. Netanyahu stated:

"The United Nations [w]as founded after the carnage of World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust. It was charged with preventing the reoccurrence of such horrendous events...Yesterday, the man who calls the Holocaust a lie spoke from this podium...A mere six decades after the Holocaust, you give legitimacy to a man who denies the murder of six million Jews while promising to wipe out the State of Israel, the state of the Jews..."<sup>34</sup>

The danger posed by the Ayatollahs, similar to that posed by the Nazis, becomes even graver, both for the Jews and for the world as a whole, with the possibility of an Iranian nuclear weapon:

"This Iranian regime is fueled by an extreme fundamentalism...[I]f the most primitive fanaticism can acquire the most deadly weapons, the march of history could be reversed for a time. And like the belated victory over the Nazis, the forces of progress and freedom will prevail only after a horrific toll of blood and fortune has been exacted from mankind. This is why the greatest threat facing the world today is the marriage between religious fundamentalism and the weapons of mass destruction. The most urgent challenge facing this body today is to prevent the tyrants of Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons...[T]he forces of terror led by Iran seek to destroy peace, eliminate Israel and overthrow the world order."<sup>35</sup>

It is a gross mistake to think that the Israeli Holocaust-fuelled sense of threat which these words embody is "merely" about existential danger. Had that been the case, then the potential Israeli-Iranian nuclear crisis should have been amenable to classic realist interpretation and solution: a nuclear weapon on both sides will deter both sides; the balance of power, mutually assured destruction, will ensure stability. But this analysis fails, and monumentally so, in the case before us, in which there is a distinct possibility that MAD will not work since Israel, constantly analogizing threats through the Holocaust-prism, is convinced that the regime it faces *is mad*, to a degree that exceeds any irrationality that the West was willing to attribute to the Soviets, for instance. The Israeli decision-making process regarding Iran maintains, practically as "certainty beyond evidence," that the Ayatollahs might be impossible to deter because they are willing not only to "bury" the enemy, in Khrushchev's words, but also bury *themselves* if that is the necessary price.<sup>36</sup>

This perception is the most important manifestation of the Holocaust analogy in general and of Ben Gurion's Holocaust-laden nightmares in particular: the belief that the Iranian regime is indifferent to "sane" cost-benefit calculations in its desire to destroy the Jewish state, as was Hitler, who diverted enormous resources in the midst of a total war to destroy the Jewish people. Already as Head of the Opposition, Netanyahu voiced fears that Iran possessing nuclear weapons "might use military action," and also "might be the first nuclear power that cannot be deterred. It is very easy to predict a messianic regime that is deterred by nothing, and that is a grave danger."<sup>37</sup> The fundamentalist quip, according to which the believer wants to die more than the non-believer wishes to live, stands at the heart of the Israeli evaluation of the Ayatollahs' motives. As one Israeli scholar recently put it, one of Teheran's foundational insights is that "The West is reluctant to make self-sacrifices, whereas Iran (and the Muslims)

Journal of Strategic Security

will be victorious because of their belief in martyrdom and jihad for the sake of Allah. The civilization which elevates the sublime objective over the value of the individual human life will prevail."<sup>38</sup>

Given this image, the realist framework, its variations included, cannot accommodate the Israeli frame of mind. On the one hand, Realists have admitted the fragility of the balance of power in the face not only of fanaticism in general, but of Hitler's fanaticism in particular: Kenneth Waltz, the father of structural realism, "laments" Churchill's inability to gain power earlier "for he understood" the danger Hitler embodied; leading game theorists Emersion Niou and Peter Oredshook "sympathize" with the view that "Hitler's personality" was more "critical to the outbreak of World War II" than "some breakdown in traditional balance-of-power forces;"<sup>39</sup> John Mueller exclaims that Hitler was single-handedly responsible for World War II, since "after World War I" he was "the only person left in Europe who was willing to risk another total war."<sup>40</sup> Yet on the other hand, Waltz also believes that a nuclear weapon would have deterred even Hitler, or at the very least, his generals;<sup>41</sup> game theory holds that conservative calculations will prevail, and that "the prospect" that Iran would "take actions...that could invite its own destruction" is therefore "highly unlikely;"<sup>42</sup> and Mueller has recently labeled Israeli comparisons between the Ayatollahs and the Nazis "extravagant," calling for a "calmer assessment" of Iran.<sup>43</sup>

Whether or not these realist positions are empirically accurate, the chances that they will register with Israeli leadership are slim. No Israeli leader will ever concede that Hitler was willing to risk another World War but not the bomb. And, whether or not the comparison is indeed extravagant, it remains highly unlikely that any Israeli leader will commit to the idea that (what is believed to be) the contemporary incarnation of the Nazis will not use the bomb, either. Israeli warnings as to a possible strike against Iran must be understood in the context of such perceived Iranian fanaticism. The classic realist tendency is to take declarations, such as those by former Defense Minister and IDF Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz, that "if Iran continues with its program for developing nuclear weapons, we will attack it,"<sup>44</sup> as simply another part of the standard dynamic of deterrence attempts, similar to the combative Iranian reactions such statements provoke. But this standard realist interpretation is inadequate for handling a policy based on a Holocaust analogy that is anything but standard.

Consider, for example, the disparity between Israeli and American intelligence regarding the question of when Iran will acquire nuclear weapons. Despite relying on the same material and frequently consulting one

another, in 2006 the Israelis predicted that Iran would need two years, while the Americans predicted five to ten years. John Negroponte, U.S. Director of National Intelligence, opined that: "sometimes what the Israelis will do—and I think that perhaps because it's a more existential issue for them—they will give you the worst-case assessment."<sup>45</sup> The problem with such explanations is not what they say but what they omit: India and Pakistan also have very obvious reasons to make the worst-case assessments regarding each other's nuclear capabilities, but neither one of them believes the other is fanatic, as is the case with the Israeli perception of Teheran. Israel's worst-case assessment is therefore demonstrably worse than practically any other case, not least because of the fixed Holocaust analogy that is obviously not shared by other states, and that has already pushed Israel to strike against nuclear targets.

This claim for the distinctiveness of the Israeli posture does not deny that Israel also utilizes standard deterrence techniques—whether through declarations of its willingness to attack Iranian reactors or through media attention to its development of a submarine-based second strike capability. Rather, the emphasis is on the degree to which brinkmanship alone does not suffice for the perpetually psychologically-scarred Jewish state. Israel officially declares that President Ahmadinejad, presumably like the Iranian regime in general, "actively endorses chaos, so as to hasten the re-emergence of the Hidden Imam and spread true Islamic rule worldwide. He believes that the Hidden Imam will return only following an apocalyptic war against Israel and the West."<sup>46</sup> And the practical implications of this Israeli belief can hardly be overstated. No second strike capability, no "breaking away from parity" with Iran,<sup>47</sup> and not even firm backing by the world's strongest military power, can quell the pronounced Israeli fears of annihilation, and the sense that the enemy will pay any price to achieve its messianic goal.

But perhaps someone would claim that such a scenario remains extraordinarily unlikely exactly because of its dependence, emphasized throughout, on the lasting memory of the Holocaust. Instead of a conclusion, the discussion now turns to anticipate two sources for this objection: first, the linkage politics argument, according to which it is mainly domestic political needs that cause the framing of Iran in Nazi terms; and second, the notion that with the changing of generations the Holocaust's grip must have greatly diminished. Both of these claims, though intuitive, are misguided.

## The Holocaust Version of Linkage Politics

Rejecting the linkage politics argument does not mean rejecting the idea that Israeli leaders often paint external threats in demonic and existential terms due to domestic political needs.<sup>48</sup> Much of Prime Minister Netanyahu's rhetoric regarding the "grave challenges posed to us" refers to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for example, though the Palestinians, as already noted above, do not in any way present Israel as a whole with an existential threat. It certainly does seem that in many cases such artificial expansion of security threats is meant to justify a "rallying behind the flag"—whether in the form of public support, or more concretely, in national unity governments which are meant to maintain incumbent leaders in power, despite a turbulent and inherently unstable political system. Yet such manipulations *depend upon rather than sustain* a threat-based collective identity, whose roots remain inextricable from the Holocaust. No other society in the world, for example, has had its former Parliament Speaker declare (as late as 2008) that:

"The list of Shoah [Holocaust] manifestations in daily life is long. Listen to every word spoken and you find countless Shoah references. The Shoah pervades the media and the public life, literature, music, art, education. These overt manifestations hide the Shoah's deepest influence. Israel's security policy, the fears and paranoia, feelings of guilt and belonging, are products of the Shoah...Sixty years after his suicide in Berlin, Hitler's hand still touches us...Israel naturalizes the Shoah victims who were dead even before we were born, embracing them into the bosom of the third State of Israel...[T]herefore our dead do not rest in peace. They are busy, present, always a part of our sad lives."<sup>49</sup>

An outsider might wonder how, during more than sixty years, Israeli society has not been able to develop a collective identity that does not revolve around the dead, and does not, as a result, engender permanent fears of collective doom. Any plausible answer must account for the profound identity crisis engulfing Zionist ideology. The Zionist project has lost its standing as a homogenous collective ethos.<sup>50</sup> As a direct result, many secular Jews find it problematic to define their identity in a way that will explain why they should be Israelis rather than, say, Americans. Israel is a deeply fragmented society that often seems like it can only sustain a shared identity against a "significant"—and preferably deadly—"other." It is thus little surprising that "For many secular Jews," as Charles Liebman and Yaacov Yadgar recently noted, being Jewish has "little content other than the fact that they [are] not Arab."<sup>51</sup> When outside threats are repre-

sented in genocidal language, this is not a maneuver imposed upon an "unsuspecting" Israeli public, but rather an image that derives from this public itself.

The fixed Holocaust analogy, then, remains pervasive in Israeli consciousness. That is the context in which one must read Israel's determination to stop Iran from reaching the bomb—despite a low probability of an effective strike, despite a very high probability of significant price, and even despite the obvious changes in "objective" geopolitical realities since the Holocaust.<sup>52</sup> That is why the connection between the Air Force jets flying in Poland and the same jets that might fly to Iran is as profound as it is unique. Anyone who wishes to draw the future of the world's most dangerous nuclear dispute must understand how omnipresent is the line drawn from Auschwitz to Natanz.

## About the Author

Shmuel Nili is a Ph.D. student in Political Science at the University of Notre Dame. His research combines a core interest in liberal approaches to global justice with secondary interests in democratic theory and the practice of liberal societies. Nili's peer-reviewed publications range from the coherence between Rawls' domestic and global theories of justice, through the humanitarian intervention debate, to the connections between nationalism, globalization, and sports. His scholarly work has appeared or is forthcoming, among others, in *Journal of Global Ethics*, *Ethics & Global Politics*, and *Global Society*. Nili has also published several professional articles for the *Israeli Democracy Institute* on the relation between media and politics, as well as numerous newspaper articles on multinational democracies and sports. Nili performed his military service as Captain in the Israeli Defense Force's (IDF) Media and Communication Division.

For helpful discussions and comments the author is grateful to Alexander Bligh, Sebastian Rosato, Ziv Rubinovitz, and Soul Park. Special thanks go to Paul Avey.

## References

- 1 Yaakov Katz, "Planning Ahead," Jerusalem Post, September 28, 2008, available at: <http://www.jpost.com/Features/InTheSpotlight/Article.aspx?id=115926>.
- 2 On the general lack of attention to processes, see Charles D. Freilich, "National Security Decision-Making in Israel: Processes, Pathologies, and Strengths," *Middle East Journal* 60 (2006), 635–663 at 635. For an overview of shifts in Israeli security doctrine, see Uri Bar-Joseph (ed.), *Israel's National Security towards the 21st Century* (Frank Cass: London, 2001).
- 3 Of course one could point to the impact of linkage politics on the Iranian side. But as the discussion below is meant to show, the Israeli position is unlikely to take assurance from such domestic explanations for the Iranian nuclear posture. On the Iranian nuclear project in a domestic context, see Gawdat Bahgat, "Nuclear Proliferation: The Islamic Republic of Iran," *Iranian Studies* 39 (2006): 307–327.
- 4 The term "fanatic" denotes more clearly than the classic "revisionist actor" the desire not only to dramatically alter the system and change the current status quo, but also to obliterate (at least parts of) the system, even at the price of one's own survival. The term "irrationality" is avoided here since fanatics can simply have a different rationale. On Hitler's fanatic desires, see Schweller, Randall, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
- 5 May, Ernest R., *"Lessons" of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), xi.
- 6 The ramifications of such an event will be enormous, whether or not the Israeli case is *sui generis*. At minimum, no historical analogy is as direct and as traumatic as that of the Holocaust. Compare for example the "third party" sense of guilt in the American Holocaust analogy, and sense of lurking threat from the famous "Munich analogy." An attempt to quell the former can be found in Michael C. Desch, "The Myth of Abandonment: The Use and Abuse of the Holocaust Analogy," *Security Studies* 15 (2006): 106–145; on the latter, see Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 63.
- 7 Such traumas, in the words of Nytagodien and Neal, "refuse to remain buried in the back reaches of human memories...Just as traumas at the individual level reappear in intrusive flashbacks and psychological disorders...collective traumas from the past continue to have a living influence upon the contemporary present." Ridwan Nytagodien and Arthur Neal, "Collective trauma, apologies, and the politics of memory," *Journal of Human Rights* 3 (2004): 465–475 at 468. See also Yael Zerubavel, "The Death of Memory and the Memory of Death: Masada and the Holocaust as Historical Metaphors," *Representations* 45 (1994): 72–100. Of course, it is hard to deny that why and how certain collective traumas linger on in different societies is largely influenced by powerful social groups, including political actors. See for example Nancy Wood, *Vectors of Memory: Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 1999). However, the point made here regarding Israel's Holocaust trauma remains valid. A psychological analysis of the Israeli posture regarding the peace process, for example, can be found in Ofer Grosbard, *Israel on the Couch* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003).



- 8 Freilich, *Decision-Making in Israel*, 637.
- 9 Shlomo Aronson, "Israel's Security and the Holocaust: Lessons Learned, but Existential Fears Continue," *Israel Studies* 64 (2009): 65–93 at 71. Aronson also claims that Ben Gurion, following the Holocaust, was reluctant to pursue policies that might completely alienate the great powers, with permanent presence in the West Bank a key example. Yet unlike the three lessons discussed here, Ben Gurion's view of the West Bank is subject to controversy. An outside perspective arguing that Ben Gurion in fact dreamt of Israeli presence in the West Bank can be found in Eliot Cohen, *Supreme Command* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 163.
- 10 Quoted in Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 65. Such scenarios, far from being "just a method of planning" were literally nightmares for Ben Gurion, who once even testified to his aide that he "could not sleep all night. I had one terror in my heart: a combined attack of all Arab armies." Quoted in Michael Bar-Zohar, *Ben Gurion: A Biography* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1979), Vol. 3, 1365 and 1368. The most recent account of Israeli concerns and nuclear programs in the American context is found in Matteo Gerlini, "Waiting for Dimona: The United States and Israel's development of nuclear capability," *Cold War History* 10, (2010): 143–161.
- 11 Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 237.
- 12 Cohen goes as far as claiming that given the sense of impending doom, Israel was willing to cross in 1967 "a threshold that it never crossed before" by improvising a nuclear device in late May 1967 "expressing the profoundness of Israel's existential dread during these days." (Cohen, "Going for the Nuclear Option," *Haaretz*, May 21, 2007 [Hebrew].) All translations from Hebrew are mine unless noted otherwise.
- 13 Of course, this attribution of fixed hostility to an enemy is common behavior in many cases aside from the Israeli one, as discussed for example in Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996). However, it can still be maintained that the dispositional attitude of the "other's" hostility is significantly enhanced in Israel by the reference point of Jewish persecution throughout history as a whole, and the Holocaust as its tragic climax.
- 14 A protest widely seen as a crucial landmark in Israeli history. See for example, Guy Ben-Porat, Yagil Levy, Shlomo Mizrahi, Arye Naor, and Erez Tzfadia, *Israel Since 1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Uri Ram, "National, Ethnic or Civic? Contesting Paradigms of Memory, Identity and Culture in Israel," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 19 (2000): 405–422; Daniel Gutwein, "Left and right post-Zionism and the privatization of Israeli collective memory," *Journal of Israeli History* 20 (2001): 9–42.
- 15 Rafael Eitan (Raful), "The raid on the Reactor from the Point of View of the Chief of Staff," *Israel's Strike Against the Iraqi Nuclear Reactor* (Jerusalem: Begin Center, 2003), 31. To his Cabinet Secretary, Begin remarked—referring to traditional Jewish names given to children in the *shtetls* of his native Poland—that he had "seen some children playing and had said to himself, 'We will never allow that contemptible villain to do to our Shloimelach [Solomon in Yiddish] and Surelach [Sarah in Yiddish] what was done to them then.'" Arye Naor, "Analysis of the Decision-Making Process," in *Israel's Strike*, 25. Neither did those reflecting on Begin's considerations have any doubt as to the definitive impact of the Holocaust.

Aviezer Ya'ari, Chief of the Research Division of the IDF's Intelligence Branch during the Osirak strike, considered it obvious that "The Prime Minister...viewed the destruction of the reactor as his primary responsibility in order to prevent the danger of a new Holocaust for the Jewish people." Ya'ari, "Intelligence Aspects of the Attack on the Iraqi Nuclear Reactor," in *Israel's Strike*, 43. For Yuval Ne'eman, member of the Atomic Energy Commission during the strike and one of the main figures of the Israeli nuclear project since Ben Gurion's days, there could "be no doubt that the Holocaust loomed in the background for both Ben-Gurion and Begin and that they knew that if there is one nation on earth that must vigilantly guard itself against destruction it is the Jewish people." Yuval Ne'eman, "My involvement in the Osirak affair," in *Israel's Strike*, 56.

- 16 As Moshe Nissim, then-Minister of Justice and member of the Ministerial Committee on Security Affairs, emphasized, "The memory of the Holocaust in which six million Jews perished, including one and a half million children, remained before his [Begin's] eyes throughout all the discussions, including the statement the Cabinet issued following the operation... [he] underscored the fact that this action was saving thousands of Israeli children from the claws of the Butcher from Baghdad." Nissim, "Leadership and Daring in the Destruction of the Iraqi Reactor," in *Israel's Strike*, 20.
- 17 Naor, *Analysis of the Decision-Making Process*, 25.
- 18 Freilich, *Decision-Making in Israel*, 637. This view is the core of the Israeli right (though not limited to it). A recent account of this part of the Israeli political spectrum can be found in Colin Shindler, *The Triumph of Military Zionism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
- 19 Anita Shapira, "Israeli Perceptions of Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism," *Journal of Israeli History* 25 (2005): 245–266. Such a Holocaust-laden reading of Israel's environment obviously does not allow room for error, let alone "relaxation." Even when an enemy is willing for the first time to negotiate—the Syrians, for instance—this is perceived neither as a sign of progress nor as a source of hope for a true transformation of the region. Rather than becoming a dovish peace-seeker, the other side simply sees no way to defeat Israel at present and would, given the opportunity to do so, rescind all supposedly-benign intentions and perhaps even the peace treaty itself. Israel's current Minister of Finance and former Head of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, Yuval Steinitz, has repeatedly warned of Egypt's continued armament despite the peace treaty, defining it as a "hostile country." See for instance Barak Ravid, "Steinitz: Egypt Hostile, Foreign Minister not welcomed," *NRG* (Hebrew), December 26, 2006, available at: <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART1/522/972.html>. Israel's current Foreign Minister, Avigdor Liberman, has even gone as far in the past as threatening the destruction of the Aswan Dam, prompting the Arab League's general secretary Amar Moosa to label Liberman "insane." See Ali Waked, "Moosa: Sharon will bring terror, Liberman Insane," *Ynet* (Hebrew), January 27, 2003.
- 20 Jonathan Mercer, "Emotional Belief," *International Organization* 64 (2010): 1–31, at 2.

The Nuclear (and the) Holocaust: Israel, Iran, and the Shadows of Auschwitz

- 21 Cf. Desch, *The Myth of Abandonment*, 111, relying also on Rose McDermott, "The Feeling of Rationality: The Meaning of Neuroscientific Advances for Political Science," *Perspectives on Politics* 2 (2004): 691–706.
- 22 A disparity which did not prevent Begin from justifying the Israeli invasion of Lebanon by comparing the PLO, the invasion's target, to the Nazis, or from adding later that he felt that besieging Yasser Arafat in Beirut was akin to besieging Hitler's bunker.
- 23 Freilich.
- 24 Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb*, 236.
- 25 "Text of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Speech," *New York Times*, October 30, 2005, available at: <http://tinyurl.com/37m33ld> ([www.nytimes.com/2005/10/30/weekinreview/30iran.html?ex=1161230400&en=26f07fc5b7543417&ei=5070](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/30/weekinreview/30iran.html?ex=1161230400&en=26f07fc5b7543417&ei=5070)).
- 26 See the official Iranian Presidential website.
- 27 See CNN's "Iran's Ahmadinejad slams Israel, proposed sanctions," June 8, 2010, available at: <http://tinyurl.com/4shurz> ([www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/meast/06/08/iran.ahmadinejad.security.summit/index.html?hpt=T2](http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/meast/06/08/iran.ahmadinejad.security.summit/index.html?hpt=T2)).
- 28 See "Ahmadinejad calls Holocaust 'great deception,'" *Reuters*, June 3, 2009, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE5525W320090603>.
- 29 Cf. Robert F. Worth, "Despite Warning, Thousands Rally in Iran," *The New York Times*, September 18, 2009.
- 30 See "The Holocaust and its Denial," *The Middle East Media Research Institute*, January 30, 2009, available at: <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/0/3060.htm>. In the same month Ahmadinejad even tried to analogize the "conspiracies" of the September 11 terrorist attacks with the Holocaust, stating: "An incident known as 9/11 occurred. It is not yet clear who carried it out, who collaborated with them, and who paved the way for them. The event took place, and—like in the case of the Holocaust—they sealed it off, refusing to allow objective research groups to find out the truth. They invaded Iraq and Afghanistan, using 9/11 as a pretext."
- 31 Cf. "Brown issues Iran nuclear warning," *BBC News*, July 21, 2008, available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/politics/7516580.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/7516580.stm); "Iran's U.N. speech 'blatant anti-Semitism': Germany," *Reuters*, September 26, 2008; and "Ahmadinejad call to destroy Israel draws French condemnation," *Haaretz*, August 3, 2006, available at: <http://tinyurl.com/63oymam> ([www.haaretz.com/news/ahmadinejad-s-call-to-destroy-israel-draws-french-condemnation-1.194367](http://www.haaretz.com/news/ahmadinejad-s-call-to-destroy-israel-draws-french-condemnation-1.194367)); Official rebuke from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan: "Reacting against Iranian leader's reported Holocaust denial, Annan points to facts," available at: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=16869&Cr=iran&Cr1=>.
- 32 Peres feared that a strike would be ineffective and bring about severe international repercussions, even officially writing to Begin as Head of the Opposition that Israel would be like a "thistle in the wilderness" following a strike. See Yitzhak Shamir, "The Failure of Diplomacy," in *Israel's Strike*, 15.

- 33 As Deputy Prime Minister. See "Iran Poses Dangerous Threat, Peres Tells ADL," *Anti-Defamation League*, May 9, 2005, available at: [http://www.adl.org/PresRele/Is/ME\\_62/4712\\_62.htm](http://www.adl.org/PresRele/Is/ME_62/4712_62.htm).
- 34 Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Address by PM Netanyahu to the UN General Assembly, September 24, 2009, available at: <http://tinyurl.com/yacovms> ([www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Foreign+Relations/Israel+and+the+UN/Speeches+-+statements/Address\\_PM\\_Netanyahu\\_UN\\_General\\_Assembly\\_24-Sep-2009.htm](http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Foreign+Relations/Israel+and+the+UN/Speeches+-+statements/Address_PM_Netanyahu_UN_General_Assembly_24-Sep-2009.htm)).
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 A recent reminder of American belief that the Soviets can be deterred is found in Keith B. Payne, "Nuclear Deterrence for a New Century," *Journal of International Security Affairs*, No. 10 (Spring 2006): 53.
- 37 Yaacov Lapin, "Netanyahu: Iran is an existential threat: we must act," *Ynet* (Hebrew), July 11, 2007.
- 38 Shmuel Bar, "Iranian Terrorist Policy and Export of Revolution," *Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya* (working paper), February 2009, available at: <http://www.herzliyaconference.org/Uploads/2903Iranian.pdf>.
- 39 Emerson M.S. Niu and Peter C. Ordeshook, "Stability in Anarchic International Systems," *American Political Science Review* 84 (1990): 1207–1234, at 1231.
- 40 John Mueller, "The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons: Stability in the Postwar World," *International Security* 13 (1988): 55–79, at 75.
- 41 See Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002).
- 42 Francis J. Gavin, "Same As It Ever Was: Nuclear Alarmism, Proliferation, and the Cold War," *International Security* 34 (Winter 2009/10): 7–37, at 16.
- 43 Mueller, *Nuclear Obsession* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 151.
- 44 "Israel to attack Iran unless enrichment stops: minister," *Reuters*, June 6, 2008, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL0625195820080606>.
- 45 Quoted in Mercer, *Emotional Belief*, 19. Interestingly, Israeli-American disagreements as well as shared knowledge gaps regarding Iranian decision-making dominated a recent high-ranking simulation of an Israeli strike. See Kenneth M. Pollack, "Osirak Redux: A crisis Simulation of an Israeli Strike on the Iranian Nuclear Program," *Brookings Institute Middle East Memo*, No. 15 (February 2010).
- 46 Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "The Iranian Threat: overview," available at: <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/The+Iranian+Threat/Overview/>
- 47 A move which realist scholars have been emphasizing with regard to U.S. conduct vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Cf. Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The Rise of U.S. Nuclear Primacy," *Foreign Affairs* 85.2 (2006): 42.
- 48 The same might of course apply to the Iranian leadership, but since the focus here is on Israeli perception this possibility is put aside.

The Nuclear (and the) Holocaust: Israel, Iran, and the Shadows of Auschwitz

- 49 Burg, Avraham, *The Holocaust is over, we must rise from its ashes* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 23–24.
- 50 In a process that has received an enormous amount of scholarly attention. For one of the more recent examples see Weissbrod, Lilly, *Israeli Identity* (London: Frank Cass, 2002).
- 51 Charles S. Liebman and Yaacov Yadgar, "Secular Jewish Identity and the condition of Secular Judaism in Israel," in Zvi Gitelman (ed.), *Religion or Ethnicity—Jewish Identities in Evolution* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009): 149–170, at 160.
- 52 That is true even if analysts like Mark Fitzpatrick are right in claiming that "At best, air strikes will only delay the program a few years, and probably not at all, unless the United States or Israel were prepared to extensively widen the bombing campaign and to repeat it in a few short years—in effect, to launch an interminable war against a Middle East foe stronger, larger and more cohesive than Saddam's Iraq." See Fitzpatrick's "Can Iran's Nuclear Capability Be Kept Latent?" *Survival* 49 (2007): 33–58 at 47. Even more recent pessimism regarding a strike can be found in Henry U. Ufomba and Robert O. Dode, "Which way to Tehran? Pre-emptive air strike, cumulative diplomacy, technical isolation and the Iranian nuclear crisis," *Journal of Public Administration and Policy Research* 2 (2010):46–52.

Journal of Strategic Security