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Iran and Israel: Engulfed in Shadow Wars and a Dangerous Strategic Rivalry

The hostility between Iran and Israel has more to do with the shifts in the balance of power in the region after the end of the Cold War than it does with the 1979 revolution in Iran. The decision makers perceptions have been influenced by geopolitical, rather than ideological, developments. Iran's rise to power and influence in the region and its nuclear program represent a challenge to Israel's regional military supremacy and, even though some scholars believe that it is uncertain that a nuclear-armed Iran will actually use a nuclear bomb against Israel, it can place the Jewish state into a particularly vulnerable position because it provides encouragement to the militant organizations who oppose Israel to adopt a more confrontational approach towards the country. Strategic pressures – beginning with the defeat of Iraq in 1991 but solidifying with Saddam Hussein's removal in 2003 – have moved Israel and Iran towards greater competition. Iran's pursuit of a nuclear program, and potentially a nuclear weapons capability, has particularly heightened tensions between the two nations. Although mutual hostility has defined Israel-Iran relations since Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979, the two sides have never engaged in a direct military conflict. They have even cooperated at times in the face of common regional threats, both before and after the revolution. Indeed, the rivalry between the two countries is by no means inevitable given the absence of territorial disputes and traditionally different regional zones of interest – the Levant for Israel and the Persian Gulf for Iran. Yet in the current regional

environment, where Iran has stepped up its anti-Israel rhetoric and is asserting its interests in areas that border Israel, each country now views the other as the principle security challenge. As Israeli anxiety increases over Iran's nuclear program and growing regional influence, "a direct military conflict between Iran and Israel may become more likely" (Mage, Dekel & Shine, 2009). Iranian-Israeli relations, since the foundation of the Jewish state in 1948, have been an intricate function of Iran's geostrategic obligations as a non-Arab, non-Sunni state in a mostly Arab and Sunni dominated region, and it's desire to "maintain stable relations with its neighbors in order to fulfill its aspiration for regional leadership" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). Iran was the first Muslim country to establish diplomatic relations with Israel and the two countries were once "strategic allies with the Shah referring to Tehran as a geo-strategic friend particularly during the 1970s" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). The two countries exploited each other for strategic gain, "on the one hand Israel, encircled by aggressive Arab states, called for the building of ties with non-Arab nations and Iran defined the periphery doctrine" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). The primary conception was that Israel could thus leapfrog its Arab foes by establishing alliances with non-Arab countries in the region while the periphery doctrine was welcomed by the Shah who had a common interest with Israel in "resisting the spread of Pan-Arabism that had been unleashed by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser who was also hostile to the Shah's regime" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). It is worth mentioning that Iran was the only country that kept Israel from suffering an energy shortage during the "oil crises and provided it with oil after the 1956 Suez Crisis" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). Iran was the only Islamic country that rejected the demand of the Arab states to destroy Israel and expressed support for recognizing the Jewish state as a sovereign and independent state. Later, during the "Yom Kippur War of 1973, Iran also gave Israel much needed support and supplied it with oil" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). This close

relationship was brought to an end by Ayatollah Khomeini with the 1979 Islamic Revolution which caused Iran to redirect its foreign policy and, of course, this affected its relations with Israel. Immediately after the revolution Ayatollah Khomeini declared that he was "not satisfied with the current world order and unilaterally terminated diplomatic ties with Israel" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). Since then, one of Iran's primary objectives in foreign policy has been to undermine Israel's legitimacy and its right to exist.

The new regime instigated its Islamic ideology with a fierce propaganda campaign in opposition to the spread of 'Zionism' in the region and the rest of the world, and adopted an "anti-Israeli, pro-Palestinian stance which immediately became an official tenet of the Islamic Republic" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). The Ayatollah declared: "this source of corruption [Israel] which has settled in the heart of the Islamic lands under the patronage of the superpowers should be eliminated through the efforts of Islamic countries" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). Subsequently Iran, in its desire to do the opposite of what the Shah had done, started playing a leading role in encouraging anti-Israeli activities in the Middle East and the entire Muslim world and moved closer to the Arab world from the Islamic viewpoint by attempting to switch the pan-Arab philosophy into a pan-Islamic world view. In contrast to Iran's hostile policy, however, Iran was still considered to be Israel's friend by, at least, some Israeli's who continued to see Iran as a strategic counterbalance to the Arab foes. During the 1980s, in the viewpoint of Ayatollah Khomeini in his tirades with Israel, there was "no further setback to the relations between the two states as both faced the common threat of the USSR and the Arabs" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). The mutual interest may be limited, but It has been real enough all along. The assumption of Israel's security establishment that Ayatollah Khomeini would be overthrown soon because Tehran was in a "nest of internecine struggle with many political opponents as consequences of

the struggle for power that was taking place" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). In addition to this, Israeli and Iranian common hostility towards Iraq, and Israel's interest in maintaining some influence with moderates within the Iranian regime led Israel to provide weapons to Iran during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Israel's offer was exactly what Iran needed. Iran's situation in the war had worsened since "ninety percent of Iran's weaponry had been purchased from the United States by the Shah and the supplies had come to an end, causing Tehran to look relentlessly for new suppliers to provide it with U.S. weapons and parts" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). According to a study conducted by the Tel Aviv Institute for National Security Studies, from "1981 to 1983… Israel secretly shipped $500 million worth of spare parts to Iran for use" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). Iran's domestic and international developments were, however, against Israel and, eventually in the mid 1980s, the arms sales to the regime ended without generating the rapprochement that Israelis expected. At the end of the war with Iraq in 1988, relations between Israel and Iran were finally severed and, in fact, because of the end of the war with Iraq, "any basis for covert engagement with Israel vanished accordingly" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). Iraq, the common enemy was subsequently seriously weakened and finally neutralized by the United States and its allies three years later in Operation Desert Storm. Furthermore, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union – which removed Tehran's fear of a "smash and grab attack aimed at Khuzestan oilfields and of Russia's ambitions of getting a warm water port, reconfigured the geopolitical map of the region and left Iran and Israel with fewer common interests" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). The Camp David peace agreement removed the threat of another war between Israel and the Arabs and consequently diminished the need for a "periphery strategy and close ties between Tehran and Israel" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). The Iran-Iraq War weakened both countries and this improved Israel's strategic environment while Iran's efforts to

incite revolution among the Arab countries and destabilize secular Arab governments distracted these countries from Israel. As Tehran's regional power had been rising, Tel Aviv's anxiety had increased and the more Tehran has been able to present itself as a very important player in the Middle East, the greater there was a risk of a Washington-Tehran accommodation. Iran had no reason to maintain its cooperation with Israel and started to focus on the Palestinian question. This, coupled with the shifting of Iran's interest to try and seduce public opinion in Arab and Muslim countries, meant that it would be taking an even harder line towards Israel. Tehran's "real politik rivalry with Israel was also reconfigured by ideological considerations and obsessive hatred…but what made the relations deteriorate more was Iran taking leadership in enmity towards Israel expressed by training, funding, and equipping Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad and inciting attacks on Israel from the West Bank and Gaza" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). The result of all of this is that Iran now faces Israel across a common border through its proxies.

Events leading to and after the 1979 revolution, followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the U.S. defeat of Iraq in 1992 led to the reconfiguration of the regions balance of power. Thus, Iran and Israel treaded further away from cooperation and more closely towards a direct rivalry in the 2000s. This development took place in an increasingly unipolar world with the United States established as the sole superpower. These events removed both the danger of Russia to Iran and the threat of Iraq to Israel and left the two countries no longer threatened by them which propelled Iran and Israel into a blatant rivalry for leadership in the region. Meanwhile, the likelihood of Iran's rise in regional power challenged Israel's supremacy by opening the prospect of a Washington-Tehran rapprochement that risked overshadowing Israel's relationship with the United States. More critically, Israel's military deterrence was at risk and "its survival deepened on its military preeminence which a rising, more militarily powerful Iran

might threaten" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). It was for this reason that, in 1992, Shimon Peres, former Prime Minister of Israel warned that "Iran is the greatest threat and greatest problem in the Middle East, because it seeks the nuclear option while holding a highly dangerous stance of extreme religious militancy" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). Concurrent with Peres, Joseph Alpher, a former official in the Mossad, cautioned the international community with the warning that "Iran has to be identified as Enemy No 1 as it would be equipped with a nuclear bomb by 1999" (Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). The two states began to see each other as principal rivals at this time. Israel's anxiety about Iran and its own relations with the United States was increasing since, not only did Tel Aviv assume that the collapse of the USSR would weaken its strategic importance for the United States, but that Iran's rise in power and influence in the region would challenge Israel's military supremacy in the Middle East.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in his address to the U.N. General Assembly mixed his dark and alarmist tone with some familiar touches of the tried politician he is, at one point pulling out a prop – "a simple diagram with a big round bomb by a lighted fuse to demonstrate Iran's progress in stockpiling enriched uranium" (LaFranchi, 2012). Despite these charades, Israel under Netanyahu's leadership was preparing for two realistic options – either to come to terms with a nuclear Iran or attempt a military strike aimed at destroying the Islamic Republic's nuclear facilitates. Netanyahu argued "a great battle is being waged between the modern and the medieval, with forces of intolerant and extremist Islam arrayed against the tolerant and freedom-loving world" (LaFranchi, 2012). For him, Iran is without a doubt an existential threat, but the same cannot be said of the rest of his cabinet. Defense Minister Ehud Barak, for example shared his view in a widely publicized interview in the Israeli press in September 2009: "I am not among those who believe Iran is an existential issue for Israel. Israel is strong, I don't see anyone

who could pose an existential threat" (Katz, 2011). Nonetheless, even those who do not believe that Iran poses an existential threat to Israel still find the prospect of a nuclear Iran alarming. It's not only the nuclear threat that worries the entire Israeli establishment but also the possibility of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. While Israel might be leading the world in its warnings regarding the inherent dangers in Iran's success in developing nuclear capability, it is not the only country that feels threatened. In November 2010, WikiLeaks, an organization run by Julian Assange, made public hundreds of secret cables that American diplomats based throughout the Middle East and the Persian Gulf had sent. Some leaders of these Arab countries were quoted as begging the United States to attack Iran. Saudi King Abdullah, for example, was quoted in one cable from 2009 as saying that the "United States needed to attack Iran and cut off the head of the snake…King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, the ruler of Bahrain, met with commander of U.S. Central Command Gen. David Petraeus and urged that the program must be stopped… [and] the danger of letting it go on is greater than the danger of stopping it" (Katz, 2011). This displayed how the anxiety over a nuclear Iran effected the foreign policies of non-rival states in the region. More noteworthy however, WikiLeaks also provided insight into Israel's shadow war against Iran highlighting how the rivalry has played out in cyberspace over the nuclear problem.

In August 2007, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns travelled to Tel Aviv for meetings with top Israeli officials. One of them was the Mossad Chief at the time, Meir Dagan, who is credited with leading Israel's efforts to deny Iran a nuclear capability. Spearheaded by Israel's Mossad and the CIA, this shadow war against Iran is partially responsible for Iran's failure to cross the technological threshold of its nuclear program. It reportedly includes "key assassinations, the sabotaging of equipment destined for Iran's nuclear program, and the defection of key members of Iran's nuclear program" (Katz, 2011). Dagan's

work reportedly paid off. Iranian scientists began to disappear; equipment sent to Iran for its nuclear program arrived broken, likely sabotaged. In 2005, a "number of mysterious plane crashes plagued Iran, killing dozens of IRGC officers, including several senior officers" (Katz, 2011). All of the above were attributed to the Mossad by Iran. During one of his last cabinet meetings before leaving office in 2009, Prime Minister Olmert said: "I believe the processes the government of Israel has enacted under my leadership in various areas, those that can be told and those that cannot, will yet receive their proper place in the history of the State of Israel" (Katz, 2011). Thus, it came as no surprise when Olmert decided twice to extend Dagan's term, making him the longest-serving Mossad chief in Israeli history. Meanwhile, relations with the CIA also peaked during Dagan at the helm and there was "unprecedented cooperation between the two agencies" (Katz, 2011). This highlighted how the rivalry effected extra-regional actors' interests in containing Iran. After his resignation on January 6, 2011, Dagan broke tradition and convened his first-ever press conference. Iran, he said, had encountered major technological complications. Stating, "even if the world sits and doesn't do anything it will still take the Iranians several years" (Katz, 2011). Dagan's replacement was announced "the same day two bombs went off in downtown Tehran, killing top nuclear scientist Majid Shahriari" (Katz, 2011). Not much was known about Shahriari's role in Iran's nuclear program, but some reports claimed he was "working on designing new nuclear reactors" (Katz, 2011). Shahriari was one of four Iranian nuclear scientists killed in similar assassinations between 2010 and 2012. In many cases, a secretive committee of the heads of the three main intelligence agencies – "the Mossad, the Shin Bet Security Agency, and Aman – debated the planned operations" (Katz, 2011). One of the key changes that led to Israel's successes in its shadow war was the increased cooperation between the different intelligence agencies, a direct result of the Iranian threat. Furthermore, the IDF

generals and their Mossad counterparts cultivated relationships, and each side learned how the other worked and how they could better utilize one another. Israel's cyber warfare technology is believed to be as advanced as that of the United States, China and Russia – that is, capable of knocking out an enemy's war grid or shutting down its economy. After the U.S. decided in 2009 to establish the Cyber Command, Israel began considering its own move; "The Aman Unit 8200, being already responsible for signal intelligence, eavesdropping on the enemy, and code decryption, was entrusted with offensive cyber capabilities" (Katz, 2011). On the offensive level, a possible taste of Israel's capability was revealed in the summer of 2010. Reports circulated that a "piece of malware, or a worm known as Stuxnet, had severely infected Iranian computer systems at its main enrichment facility at Natanz and its reactor at Bushehr" (Katz, 2011). News spread quickly about the malware as Iran blocked its computers to the outside world to prevent leaking the extent of the damage. In November 2010, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) openly confirmed that "Iran had encountered major technological difficulties and has suspended work at its nuclear-field production facilities, likely as a result of Stuxnet virus" (Katz, 2011). A few days later, then-Iranian president Ahmadinejad admitted that malicious software had damaged the nation's centrifuge facilities. He downplayed the extent of the damage that Ralph Langner, a German information technology expert explained was "nearly as effective as a military strike but even better since there are no fatalities and no full-blown war. From a military perspective this was a huge success" (Katz, 2011). By 2012, Iran claimed that the virus had been neutralized. But more important, in Israel and Iran it was understood that Stuxnet – regardless of who was behind it – was likely only the beginning of the world's new art of warfare.

Cyber warfare is quieter, being fought in the shadows on adversaries' computers, but is "as deadly as a missile or a rocket" (Katz, 2011). Assassinations have not been Israel's only instrument in its battle against Iran's nuclear program and support for proxies against Israel. Western intelligence agencies have also "focused their efforts on the financial hierarchy in Iran" (Katz, 2011). They have used high-tech tools to hack Iranian computers and bank accounts and to cause money that was intended "for procurement or nuclear technology to disappear" (Katz, 2011). There have also been countless reports of sabotage. One well-known example occurred in 2007 "when power supplies used to regulate voltage and current at the Natanz enrichment plant blew up, destroying dozens of centrifuges" (Katz, 2011). In other cases, the "U.S. and European governments recruited companies around the world to sell the Iranians faulty components manufactured with undetectable flaws" (Katz, 2011). This sabotage, focused on the supply chain that the Iranians were relying on for their nuclear program, was instrumental in delaying Iran's nuclear progress. While Israel by 2010 was investing tremendous resources in collecting intelligence on Iran, the Iranians were fighting back. In the mid-2000s, "the Iranians or Hezbollah would announce the discovery and capture of another Israeli spy ring every few months" (Katz, 2011). Insight into this battle of wits was provided in 2008 when the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security captured Ali Ashtari, a businessman from Tehran, and accused him of working for the Mossad. Ashtari confessed to "meeting Mossad agents in Thailand, Turkey, and Switzerland, where he received $50,000 and was asked to bug communication devices that he had sold to the Iranian military and members of the nuclear program" (Katz, 2011). Ashtari also revealed that he had tried to recruit figures involved in Iran's nuclear project on behalf of Mossad. The Shin Bet Security Agency said that Iran's intelligence focused on three main points: "Israeli's decision-making echelon, its military and

defense establishments, and the strengths and weaknesses of Israeli society" (Katz, 2011). To combat the penetration of its nuclear program, in 2005 Iran established "Oghab-2, a counterintelligence bureau whose mission is to prevent information regarding Iran's nuclear program from leaking out of the country" (Katz, 2011). The regime also tasked the bureau with monitoring top Iranian scientists on their trips overseas on conferences and with ensuring that equipment procured for the nuclear program had not been sabotaged.

The feasibility of attacking Iran, if one ignores political considerations, is based on two primary military questions: First, does the military have the required intelligence to locate and identify targets? Second, does the military have the operational capabilities to carry out the mission? Operational capabilities have to take into account not only the "ability to reach, bomb and destroy the targets but also the ability to overcome the resistance that the strike package will encounter, such as enemy aircraft and surface-to-air missiles" (Katz, 2011). Assessments in Israel are split regarding these two questions and whether Israel can live with a nuclear Iran. One school of thought believes "Iran is bent on destroying Israel and that once it obtains a nuclear weapon, it will not hesitate to use it against the Jewish state" (Katz, 2011). The other school of thought believes that "Iran as it seems – is a complicated convoluted nation with varying and sometimes conflicting interests" (Katz, 2011). While Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei may call for Israel's destruction, he is believed to be more rational and pragmatic than President Ahmadinejad and to have a more global perspective. Ultimately, this school of thought argues that "Iran's program is motivated by national interests aimed at increasing its influence in the Middle East and not simply about destroying the Jewish state" (Katz, 2011). U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in 2006 gave his explanation for why Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons. He said "elements in Iran, more senior than the president, wanted a nuclear capability for

deterrence and not offensive purposes" (Katz, 2011). While they are certainly pressing for nuclear capability, he believed they would see it in the first instance as a deterrent. He continued, Iran is "surrounded by powers with nuclear weapons: Pakistan in their east, the Russians to the North, the Israelis to the west and U.S. in the Persian Gulf" (Katz, 2011). One senior Israeli defense official warned that Iran could actually follow in the footsteps of Israel, which maintains a strong policy of ambiguity regarding its own nuclear capability, neither denying nor confirming that it has the weapon. Moreover, "ambiguity could be what they are really after… They will build the bomb without making any announcements and then one day, when it is comfortable for them, they will present it to the world" (Katz, 2011). The accumulation of evidence led to a global consensus in 2010 that Iran was definitely working covertly on making a nuclear weapon. For most of the world this assessment was not new. For the U.S., however, this determination was a "sharp break from the official National Intelligence Estimate of late 2007 that had concluded that Iran had suspended its nuclear weapons program in 2003 and likely had not renewed it" (Katz, 2011). Part of the new intelligence it presented came from "Shahram Amiri, the Iranian scientist who had disappeared in 2009 while on the Hajj in Saudi Arabia" (Katz, 2011). Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said in a private meeting in Tel Aviv in April 2010: "The U.S. is much closer to our assessments today…Everyone understands that the materials that Iran is hoarding have no other purposes than making a bomb" (Katz, 2011). Either way, in making a decision, Israel still faces two options - either launching a large-scale war that would escalate to other parts of the region or allowing Iran to go nuclear. "The fallout of a preemptive attack would be painful," Defense Minister Ehud Barak said in 2011 (Katz, 2011).

The effect the Iran-Israel rivalry has had on non-rival states and extra-regional actors is profound. Specifically, in Syria, following the upheaval post-2011 – the country has become the

battleground for Iranian proxies and have increased Israeli anxiety over a direct confrontation. Iran runs it proxy wars in Arab countries and territories where there is a border with Israel's enemies, such as in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. There was an Israeli effort to persuade the United States to refrain from completely abandoning the Syrian arena to Russia, and indirectly to Iran. Indeed, most areas controlled by the Islamic State that were freed by the Americans have been seized by Iran and its proxies. Netanyahu warned in 2015, that "Israel will continue to respond forcefully to attacks against it from Syria" (Eilam, 2019). Its mission is to secure the border in case of a low intensity war – the last time such confrontation happened was in the late 1960s. it is all part of the Israeli effort "to prevent the war in Syria from spilling over into Israel" (Eilam, 2019). Israel aimed at creating a buffer zone, where "pro-Israeli forces would be present to oppose Assad and Iran's proxies in Syria" (Eilam, 2019). Israel does not want Iran to do to Syria what it did with the Gaza Strip and mostly with Lebanon: "to turn countries and territories around Israel into an Iranian fire base" (Eilam, 2019). Iran needs Syria to contain Israel. In Syria, Iran wants to decide when Hezbollah confronts Israel, not to be surprised by an escalation like the one that led "to the 2006 war due to miscalculations" (Eilam, 2019). Iran is also aware that Assad's downfall would have shown that it failed to save its closest ally amongst Arab rulers, with all the ramifications this would have had on Iran's prestige in the region. Netanyahu and Defense Minister Lieberman "expressed their rejection to the establishing of an Iranian stronghold in Syria and aimed at preventing "nuclear weapons being acquired by the Iranian government and to downgrade its allies and proxies which hold covert Iranian support" (Langton, 2019). Israel suspects Tehran is pursuing the goal of forming a continuous land transport route from "Iran via Iraq and Syria to Lebanon which it opposes because it believes it would serve as a security threat to Israel" (Langton, 2019). It also seeks to

possess a harbor on the shores of Syria, but this goal "causes friction between Iran and Russia, since Russia wants the same thing" (Eilam, 2019). Iranian domination of Syria could bring a war between Syria and Israel, "which could really mean an Iran-Israel war… [but both countries] have an interest in containing such a war in Syria" (Eilam, 2019). Focusing on the non-rival actors in the region, the Arab peace initiative from 2002 was formed because Arab states like Saudi Arabia realized Iran is their real foe, not Israel. In fact, the director general of Israel's Foreign Ministry, Dore Gold, called the Middle East' Sunni Arab nations "Israel's allies" (Eilam, 2019). A clear example of how the rivalry has affected the foreign policies of states in the region is in mid-2016 when a letter signed by U.N. ambassadors of Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Yemen said: "Iran continues to play a negative role in causing tensions and instability in the Middle East by intervening in the internal affairs of Arab states" (Eilam, 2019). Israel agrees and is determined to prohibit the creation of what it terms as an "independent Iranian war machine" (Schwartz, 2019). The spreading of Iranian influence across the region demonstrates to Israel and Arab states both the need and challenge of containing Iran. Moreover, the anxiety over the nuclear weapons program raises alarm to the possibility of non-proliferation across the region. With a number of Gulf States in December 2006 announcing that they would consider "developing a shared civilian nuclear program to create an immediate balance of power with Iran" (Katz, 2011). A direct confrontation between Iran and Israel runs the risk of spreading to other parts of the Middle East with Iran potentially attacking American forces based in the Persian Gulf and Saudi oil fields. In this case, the question of what the U.S. would do is unclear. Would it become actively engaged militarily, or would it confine its response to engaging in diplomatic endeavors, to recruiting allies to retaliate, and to watching from the sidelines? It is unlikely that Tehran would preemptively engage with Tel Aviv militarily and is more likely to

respond to Israeli aggression by unleashing Hezbollah and Hamas. The strategic rivalry between Iran and Israel remains a source of instability in the region – how regional and non-rival actors coalesce in containing Iran's ambitions will provide insight in the relationship's future trajectory.

Events leading to and after the 1979 revolution, followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the U.S. defeat of Iraq in 1992 led to the reconfiguration of the regions balance of power. Thus, Iran and Israel treaded further away from cooperation and more closely towards a direct rivalry in the 2000s. This development took place in an increasingly unipolar world with the United States established as the sole superpower. These events removed both the danger of Russia to Iran and the threat of Iraq to Israel and left the two countries no longer threatened by them which propelled Iran and Israel into a blatant rivalry for leadership in the region. Israel's anxiety about Iran and its own relations with the United States was increasing since, not only did Tel Aviv assume that the collapse of the USSR would weakened its strategic importance for the United States, but that Iran's rise in power and influence in the region would challenge Israel's military supremacy in the Middle East. Finally, the looming threat of Iranian nuclear capability continues to trigger anxiety in the Israeli establishment and amongst non-rival and extra-regional actors. The threat of upending the balance of power and its tilt towards Iran remains a significant source of concern for Israel and regional actors. Either way, in making a decision, Israel still faces two options – either launching a large-scale war that would escalate to other parts of the region or allowing Iran to go nuclear.

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