

Explaining the Difference Between Israeli and Iranian Nuclear Programs Through the
Lens of Nuclear Ambiguity: Does it matter?
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International Security in the Nuclear Age
Prof. Peter Jones

Aleks Dzintars
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Student Number: 7354935

The strongest military in the Middle East belongs to Israel. As of 2014, it has the third-largest military budget, behind only Turkey and Saudi Arabia (Haaretz 2014). By virtue of having a close relationship with the United States, Israel retains an undeniable qualitative military edge over all other countries in the region. Specifically, the Israelis possess an edge with respect to drones, fighter jets, and space technologies (Haaretz 2014). In addition to all of these advantages, Israel is also the only state in the Middle East to possess nuclear weapons. While the Israelis themselves vehemently deny this point, certain evidence and rhetoric has proven the existence of operable nuclear weapons facilities in Israel. Similarly, Iran maintains that it seeks nuclear power solely for peaceful reasons, despite evidence suggesting that a nuclear weapons program may be their end goal. The glaring difference between the two countries is that Israel's possession of nuclear weapons has gone relatively unchallenged, while the international community has continuously tried to stall Iran's nuclear development.

This paper will examine the reasons for this discrepancy in scrutiny and pose the question: if Iran were to have mimicked Israel's policy of 'nuclear ambiguity' since the rule of the Shah, would it matter? Would Iran currently possess nuclear weapons? First, this paper will address the history of nuclear development and nuclear policy of both countries since 1950. Second, this essay will illustrate the foundations of Israel's 'ambiguity' policy and determine whether the behaviour and posture of Iran has been similar to that of Israel. Lastly, the impact of the United States on both countries nuclear programs will be assessed.

Israel's Nuclear Development and Ambiguity History

Since the first stages of development, the Israelis have pursued a specific strategy of 'nuclear ambiguity.' Cochran (1996) defines this policy as one that "neither [confirms] nor [denies] its possession of nuclear weapons, while simultaneously developing a sophisticated, regionally-unique nuclear infrastructure (321). Put differently, the Israelis have deliberately chosen to stay silent or in denial on the topic of nuclear weapons while also looking to develop a nuclear weapons program.

The development of nuclear arms as well as the policy of nuclear ambiguity began with Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion. According to Michael Karpin (2009), Ben-Gurion visited the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany in 1945. Eyewitnesses and aides to Ben-Gurion recall that "he had never been able to free himself from the scenes he had witnessed", and that "the connection between the Holocaust and the ultimate weapon was etched into his consciousness" (32). Witnessing the aftermath of the Holocaust first-hand had allegedly motivated Ben-Gurion to pursue nuclear weapons (32). In 1948, Israel became a state and therefore gained new neighbours. These neighbours, all of them Arab states, were opposed and hostile to Israel's existence. The fear that the Arab states may band together and seek to invade Israel further motivated David Ben-Gurion's drive for security (Cohen and Miller 2010; Cohen & Frankel 1987, 16). Fearing another Holocaust brought on by the surrounding Arab nations, and the survival of the Israeli people, he realized the advantages and necessity associated with nuclear weapons.

The 1950s marked the first recorded years that Israel had begun nuclear activities. On June 13th 1952, David Ben-Gurion established the Israel Atomic Energy Commission (IAEC). A year later in 1953, the Israelis entered into a pact with the French Commissariat of Atomic Energy. This agreement entitled the Israelis to French nuclear information and some basic technologies (Cochran 337). France and Israel worked together again in 1956 during the Suez Crisis, battling together with the United Kingdom against Egyptian forces. In return, the French bestowed upon Israel “a package of nuclear facilities” that was installed in Dimona, a southern city in the Negev desert (Karpin 32-33).

The 1950s also marked the first examples of Israeli nuclear ambiguity. The Israel Atomic Energy Commission, which was founded by 1952, had in fact been kept secret from the Israeli government’s legislative branch, the Knesset, and other officials until November 19th, 1954 (Cochran 331). David Ben-Gurion, in keeping with his policy of secrecy and ambiguity, had kept this development from his peers. Further, when pressed about nuclear facilities being built in Dimona in 1960 after an American U-2 flight had detected its presence, the Prime Minister withheld its real purpose. He initially claimed that the building in question was a textile plant, before ‘admitting’ later in a speech before the Knesset that it was indeed a nuclear plant, but asserted that it was intended solely for peaceful purposes (326).

Although the specific timing is unknown, Israel’s decision to develop nuclear weapons occurred either in late 1962 or 1963 (Maoz 2003, 46). It was at this time that the United States under President John F. Kennedy made an overt attempt to curb Israel’s nuclear aims. In October 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union had nearly entered

into a nuclear war. The Soviet Union had placed nuclear weapons in Cuba in an attempt to gain parity with the United States. This caused the Americans to respond with a naval blockade of Soviet ships, and the Soviets retreated, effectively ending the Cuban Missile Crisis. The conflict and lessons were not lost on President Kennedy. He had been exposed to a potential nuclear disaster and feared the existence and proliferation of nuclear weapons worldwide. Once Israel was suspected of attempting to obtain the ultimate weapon, the United States looked to dissuade Israel from its nuclear pursuits. As written by Cohen & Miller (2010):

The idea of a nuclear-armed Israel was perceived as antithetical to US global and regional interests. President John F. Kennedy feared that without decisive global action to curb nuclear proliferation, the number of nuclear weapons states would inevitably rise...

The United States president did not wait long to act. In the early months of 1963, the Kennedy administration pressed the Israeli government to allow US nuclear inspection once a year in order to verify the intentions of Israel's nuclear program (Cohen & Miller 2010). Despite David Ben-Gurion's announcement of peaceful nuclear ambitions in association with the Dimona reactor, Kennedy remained unconvinced and demanded proof.

Despite the best efforts of the United States government to stall their program, Israel continued on its path of nuclear development. Cohen & Miller (2010) assert that the Israelis were able to mask their program because of the timing of the visits by the Americans and the limited access granted to inspections. As a result, no incriminating

evidence was found and by the time of the Six-Day War, June 1967, Israel had crossed the nuclear threshold (Cohen & Miller 2010). In 1967, General Moshe Dayan was quoted as saying: “Israel possesses the scientific and technical capacity to produce an atomic bomb should the Arab states threaten to use such a bomb, but Israel will never be the first to launch warfare in the Middle East” (Cochran 327). While the general ambiguously announced the capabilities of the Israeli nuclear policy, he also hinted at what, in the next year, would become Israel’s nuclear policy.

In 1968, Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol was the first to articulate Israel’s nuclear policy, despite 20 years of clandestine development. The policy rests on three main pillars. First, Israel does not possess nuclear weapons. Second, Israel will not be the first country in the Middle East to introduce nuclear weapons. Lastly, while Israel does not seek to build and does not currently have nuclear weapons, it has the capacity to manufacture and use them if needed (Cochran 325). This is the first iteration of Israel nuclear policy and variants have been evoked by Israeli leaders ever since. In December 1974, Israeli President Emphraim Kitzir, when questioned by a group of American and European writers emphasized his nation’s ability to engage in nuclear warfare without mentioning nuclear weapons directly: “We now have the potential... We will defend this country with all possible means at hand. We have to develop more powerful and new weapons to protect ourselves” (Cochran 326). This stance of ambiguity continued on into the 1980s. When asked in 1984 if Israel possessed nuclear weapons, Minister of Science Yuval Ne’eman responded:

That’s technically accurate but could be misleading in terms of the length of time required to make one. If we were to cross the threshold, we would provide

every justification for third parties to arm the Arabs. So we have every interest to create the infrastructure, in order not to be caught unprepared, and then stop. We say we have not crossed the nuclear threshold. How close we are, we don't say (Cochran 328).

Neither Kitzner nor Ne'eman openly spoke about possessing nuclear weapons, only that Israelis possessed the means to acquire and build them, should they feel the need to do so. Statements by both individuals demonstrate the continuous adherence to nuclear ambiguity that has come to define Israeli policy.

Nuclear ambiguity continues to present itself in the culture of Israel, both in law and in custom. Israeli law regarding security publications is reminiscent of Soviet censorship. According to Karpin (2009): "...The law requires that all Israeli media, foreign journalists based in Israel, academic researchers, and authors who intend to publish information about Israel's security of defense matters – especially, the nuclear issue – submit their manuscript to military censorship for inspection" (31). When regarding customs and norms, it is known and accepted by Israeli citizens to make no mention of its nuclear program. They are encouraged to remain silent and deny its existence (Cohen & Miller 2010). It is a tacit and unspoken agreement. Karpin (2009) notes that while there is an emphasis from above i.e. the state to remain ambiguous, it is also an inculcated norm that has been adopted and perpetuated by the Israeli public voluntarily (31). The policy of 'nuclear ambiguity' has been and continues to be pervasive in Israeli society. Since the earliest days of Israel's history, the state and its citizens have been committed to keeping its nuclear intentions quiet. This ambiguity has

arguably allowed it to develop a relatively uninterrupted nuclear program over the course of 60 years.

Iran's History of Nuclear Development

Iran's nuclear program similarly started roughly 60 years ago. In 1957, the United States and Iran signed a civil nuclear cooperation agreement whereby the United States provided technical assistance and leased enriched uranium to Iran (Bahgat 2006, 308). Again in cooperation with the United States under former US President Dwight Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace program, Iranian students traveled to America to study nuclear engineering (Steinbach 2011). In the late 1960s, Iran established its own research reactor and founded the Atomic Center of Tehran University (Bahgat 308). In the 1970s under the Shah, Iran became even more active in its nuclear development. After Tehran had approved plans for building 20 commercial reactors Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi stated that "Petroleum is a noble material, much too valuable to burn...we envision producing, as soon as possible, 23,000 megawatts of electricity using nuclear plants" (Steinbach 2011). Outside third party help in combination with significant oil revenues helped Iran towards its goal of nuclear development (Steinbach 2011). Western powers, particularly from Europe and the United States, were major contributors to the development of Iran's nuclear program. As Beeman (2006) acutely notes: "Every aspect of Iran's current nuclear development was approved and encouraged by Washington in the 1970s." Specifically after 1972, the Americans were "ravidly pursuing investment

opportunities in Iran”. The United States under Gerald Ford went as far as to offer Iran a complete reprocessing facility meant to extract plutonium from used reactor fuel, arguing that nuclear power will jumpstart Iran’s economy (Beeman 2006; Steinbach 2011). Other countries, such as Germany, sold Tehran two nuclear reactors in 1975, while France entered into a contract with Iran that saw the French agree to build two additional reactors at Darkhovin (Steinbach 2011).

After years of growing its nuclear program, Iran saw its development abruptly stall in the final years of the 1970s. Despite the generosity displayed by the Western powers from the early to mid-1970s, their cooperation with Iran came to an abrupt end with the culmination of the Iranian revolution in 1979; Western powers withdrew their support from Tehran after the regime change had taken place. Steinbach (2011) mentions several other factors that furthered stalled Iran’s nuclear development. The mass exodus of Iranian nuclear scientists drastically hampered Iran’s capabilities to continue its nuclear development and perhaps more importantly, new Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was radically opposed to the idea of nuclear technology, believing that it contradicted “the basic tenets of Islam (Bahgat 2006, 309).

Khomeini’s death also symbolized the rebirth of Iran’s nuclear ambitions. With a new leader and a new mentality in place, the Iranians once again sought to resume the nuclear program that had developed so robustly prior to the Revolution of 1979. Said Ali Khamenei in 1987: “Regarding atomic energy, we need it now...our nation has always been threatened from outside. The least we can do to face this danger is to let our enemies know that we can defend ourselves” (Timmerman 1995). The difficulty they faced, however, was that relations with the Western powers remained distant, forcing the

Iranians to strike new partnerships. Among these new partners were both the Soviet Union and China. The 1990s saw Iran complete nuclear cooperation agreements with governments in Moscow and Beijing (Bahgat 2007, 7) as well as an \$800 million Iranian-Russian deal to complete the first Iranian reactor at Bushehr (Bahgat 2007, 7; Steinbach 2011).

Iran has proceeded with its nuclear development in the new millennium, albeit with certain hurdles. Specifically, Israel and the United States have both been involved in deterring Iran's nuclear progress. The United States has pressed for sanctions on Iran via the UN Security Council and has branded the former Persian Empire as part of "an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world" (PBS). Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently appeared before the United States Congress, arguing that Iran must be stopped for it "poses a grave threat [to] the peace of the entire world" (WP 2015).

Iran's Nuclear Ambiguity

Nevertheless, Iran has maintained, in a vein similar to Israel, that it does not possess nuclear weapons. Moreover, the Iranians maintain that the existence of its nuclear program is purely for nuclear power and otherwise peaceful aims. Given then the similar histories of nuclear development and rhetoric of both countries, why does Iran continue to be pressed by the West to abandon its nuclear program, while Israel's possession of

nuclear arms remains unquestioned? Had Iran's followed Israel's example of nuclear ambiguity, would it currently be in a different position than the one it is in now?

Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity has arguably led to its ability to develop and possess nuclear weapons. In order to determine whether Iran would currently enjoy the same outcome if it had closely followed Israel's nuclear policy, a deconstruction of Israeli nuclear ambiguity is required. Nuclear ambiguity relies on both the ability to create sufficient doubt in others about the existence of one's own nuclear program while also conveying enough of a threat in order to deter potential aggressors. As previously mentioned, Israel's official nuclear policy rests on three pillars: 1) it does not possess nuclear weapons; 2) Israel will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons in the Middle East; and 3) Israel has the capacity to build nuclear weapons if it is threatened or feels the need to do so. In other words, Israel, as demonstrated by its official policy, intends to demonstrate to others that it does not possess nuclear weapons while also suggesting it has the capability to create and use them.

It is important to note that in order to create and maintain the necessary level of doubt, both public and private domains need to be congruent in their message. As Cohen and Frankel (1987) argue: "an ambiguous posture is inherently a fragile one that must be carried out secretly, *relying heavily on the cooperation of all involved*, not only in the planning but also in its implementation" (18; emphasis added). If Israeli citizens were to question the state's prerogatives and seek to make them public, the policy of 'nuclear ambiguity' would no longer be ambiguous. This hypothetical outcome would arguably subject Israel to "adverse political, military, and diplomatic ramifications" (Maoz 47), thus defeating the purpose of the policy. Therefore, Iran's actions and rhetoric will be

judged against Israel's official and tacit policies of nuclear ambiguity in order to determine what, if anything, Iran could have done differently to positively affect its current position.

The Iranians seem to have, at first glance, compromised their ability to develop a nuclear program and to hide their ambitions. Iran's general missteps with respect to nuclear policy can be filtered down to two main points: damaging rhetoric and skeptical behaviour. As summarized by Beeman (2006):

Even those who admit that the United States helped start Iran's nuclear development can produce only two factors that make a difference in how Iran should be treated today, as opposed to the '70s. The most recent factor is President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's widely denounced remarks attack Israel. The second, older factor is Iran's alleged concealment of nuclear-energy development in the past.

While former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's remarks serve as the most powerful in recent memory, there are numerous examples of Iranian rhetoric that have alarmed the rest of the international community. Some sources claim that under the Shah, a nuclear weapons program was already being developed. In the mid-1970s, this inclination was supported by the Shah himself, who was quoted as saying that Iran would possess nuclear weapons "without a doubt and sooner than one would think" (Bahgat 2006, 309). In 1991, Iranian Deputy President Ataollah Mohajerani told daily newspaper Abrar that:

Muslim states 'should strive to go ahead' and develop nuclear weapons. 'I am not talking only about one Muslim country, but rather all the Muslim states,' and 'if Israeli should be allowed to have nuclear power then Muslim states, too, should be allowed to have the same' (Timmerman 1995).

By alluding to its nuclear weapon motivations, Iran had made the rest of the international community suspicious of its intentions.

Serious threats have also been levied by Iran against Israel, particularly with mention to annihilation, since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. As soon as the Shah was disposed, the clerical rulers intensified the Arab-Israeli conflict, calling for the destruction of Israel. As said by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, "this source of corruption 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, 444). On December 15th 2000, the current Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, declared on national Iranian television: "it is the mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to erase Israel from the map of the region" (454). Former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during his term in office had reflected this sentiment, describing Israel as an "illegal political entity that is bound to disappear from the pages of history", and later asserting that it must be "wiped off the map" (Fathi 2005). Just as David Ben-Gurion had feared another Holocaust brought on by the Arabs in the 1950s, recent Iranian promises of destruction had "reawakened the [Israeli] annihilation syndrome" (Karpin 36).

In addition to its rhetoric, Iran's behaviour of concealment has made the international community wary of its nuclear aspirations. As a result, other states have

become more watchful of Iran's nuclear program. In 2002, two Iranian nuclear facilities were publicly revealed: a uranium-enrichment at Natanz and a heavy-water facility at Arak (Bahgat 2006; 310). The evidence had become public when an Iraqi-based, Iranian exile group, the National Council of Resistance in Iran, had disclosed the information to multiple outlets, citing sources inside the Iranian government (Rezaei & Cohen 450). This disclosure was particularly damaging to Iran for two reasons. First, at the time of the exposure of the facility at Natanz, the Iranians had readied approximately 50,000 centrifuges to enrich uranium (Dickey et al. 2005). These figures suggest that their nuclear program had progressed significantly, perhaps very closely to achieving nuclear weapons, only to be stalled again by the information released by the Iranian exile group. Secondly, because the reactor was kept secret from the rest of the international community, organizations and states began to investigate Iran's nuclear intentions. In other words, the attempt by the Iranians to conceal their program made other states, especially the United States and Israel, increasingly suspicious, cautious and watchful of Iran. As underscored by Rezaei & Cohen (2014), "the disclosure was a disaster for the regime because the pilot-project was using high-speed centrifuges which was a sophisticated technology likely to put the United States on high alert" (450). The following year in March 2003, the IAEA travelled to Iran to inspect its nuclear facilities. However, as Dickey et al. (2005) point out, the inspectors had limitations, leading to increased suspicion of the international community. Initially, the investigators had been denied access to certain military areas. The areas that they were permitted access to were granted visitation rights but were forbidden to take samples. Later that year in August, the inspectors were granted permission to return to Kalaye Electric Company, a workshop in

Tehran where centrifuge components were made, as admitted by the Iranians (Dickey et al. 2005; NTI). However, the inspectors arrived at the workshop only to find it in a completely different state; it had been completely renovated (Dickey et al. 2005).

Unsurprisingly, the reasons and justification for the current sanctions placed on Iran are due to a lack transparency and in its “delay” of announcing the existence of its nuclear reactors.

In addition to the attempted concealment of its nuclear program, Iran has drawn negative attention by supporting terrorist regimes in the Middle East. Since the Iranian Revolution and subsequent regime change, Tehran has involved itself with and sponsored several anti-Israel organizations including Hamas, Jihad, and Hezbollah. After the conclusion of the Oslo Peace Accords, Iran made an attempt to reach out to the various Palestinian armed resistance groups (Rezaei & Cohen 444). In 2006 during the Lebanon War, Hezbollah was found to be using Iranian-made C-802 missiles to strike an Israeli warship (Plushnick-Masti 2006). Although currently at odds with one another, Iran has also been a major financier of Hamas’ operations in Syria, tracing as far back as 2006 (Tait 2013). This behaviour, in combination with its rhetoric and attempts of concealment, has drawn international attention to Iran’s nuclear program, thus constraining Iran in its ability to develop a nuclear program.

In sum, the differences between Iran and Israel with respect to their nuclear development remain in the rhetoric and behaviour. Iran has openly threatened and targeted another state, whereas Israel has not. Israel has not financed any internationally recognized terrorist groups while Iran has. It is precisely the combination of a potential nuclear stockpile, fiery rhetoric, support of international terrorist groups, and evidence of

concealment that has contributed to the international spotlight on the Iranians. A program of nuclear development alone or support of terrorist organizations are not reasons enough to warrant alarm. Japan has a highly developed nuclear program, while Saudi Arabia has been accused of financing certain terrorist organizations. Neither country has faced the type of scrutiny that Iran has faced over the last 35 years. Iran stands alone as a unique example whereby its rhetoric and actions have stalled its nuclear program.

However, when comparing Israel's nuclear policy of ambiguity to Iran's policy over the past 60 years, there are more similarities than differences. Part of Israel's nuclear ambiguity relies on conveying enough of a threat in order to deter potential aggressors. Both countries have alluded to the ability of being able to build or to acquire nuclear weapons in a short amount of time and both have, at one point, argued that the intention of their nuclear programs are for peaceful purposes. The other requirement of nuclear ambiguity is to deny the existence of one's own nuclear weapons; to that point, neither country has publicly declared possession of its nuclear arms. Interestingly, both Israel and Iran have also attempted to conceal their nuclear programs: Israel from the United States in the 1960s and Iran from the wider international community and the IAEA. Lastly, the Iranian public is arguably equal to Israel in its support for the state nuclear program. As argued by Bahgat (2006):

On almost all domestic and foreign policy issues, Iran spoke with more than one voice. Nuclear power, however, is one of the few exceptions. The right to develop nuclear power is a matter of national pride, where the population is largely united behind the regime (323).

Although there are many who do not support the Iranian regime, the elites and the public in both Iran and Israel are relatively united on the issue of nuclear development. As the evidence suggests, Iran has very closely mimicked the stance and behaviour of the Israelis, both in the public and private domains.

Iran has not only mirrored Israeli nuclear policy; it has also made more of an effort to legitimize its nuclear program. For example, the argument can be made that Iran has done more to appease the international community than Israel has. Iran is a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and has been since 1979 (Steinbach 2011), while Israel has yet to do so (Cochran 329). Moreover, the Iranians have signed -- albeit under increased international pressure -- the Additional Protocol, which gives more freedom to the IAEA inspectors during their investigations (Bahgat 2007, 8). As a compliant signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran is entitled by international law to develop its own nuclear program. Under Article IV of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, it reads:

1. Nothing in this Treaty shall be interpreted as affecting the inalienable right of all the Parties to the Treaty to develop research, production and use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination and in conformity with Articles I and II of this Treaty (UNODA).

Despite allegations by Western powers that Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons, there has been no concrete evidence to suggest that Tehran's motivations are disingenuous. As of 2011, the IAEA concluded that there was no evidence to suggest that Iran was pursuing a nuclear weapons program, which is reflective of the same conclusions reached by a 2007 US National Intelligence Estimate (Steinbach 2011).

Israel, on the other hand, has been able to develop its nuclear program as it sees fit. As articulated by Steinbach (2011), the Israelis, “with an arsenal of hundreds of modern nuclear weapons and a sophisticated delivery system capable of targeting the entire Middle East and Europe, [are] permitted to act with impunity.”

The Impact of the United States

If, then, Iran has been more accommodating to international law, and if the ambiguities of both Iranian and Israeli policy are similar, is rhetoric alone enough to explain the difference in international scrutiny between Israel and Iran? The simple answer yes and no. It is the United States and its role as the global superpower that ultimately explains the difference in scrutiny, while rhetoric and behaviour towards Israel reinforce the initial negative perception of Iran by the West since the Iranian Revolution. In Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, the United States had a pro-Western ally that supported the existence of Israel and protected its resource interests from the Soviets. After the Shah was deposed, the United States no longer had an ally it could trust, much less one whose intentions they knew. Relatively unknown to the United States were the levels of detest the new clerical regime harboured against the former Iranian leader. When the Americans granted the Shah asylum, the Iranians reacted by overrunning the United States embassy in Tehran. The subsequent kidnapping of 66 individuals and news broadcasts capturing chants of ‘Death to America!’ marked the beginning of current tense relations between the United States and Iran (WHHA). Since then, the United States has

kept and aggressive and watchful eye on the Iranian regime. Iran has been accused by most Western powers, predominantly the United States, of seeking to obtain nuclear weapons (Bahgat 2007, 4). Moreover, since the early 2000s, the United States has continuously threatened to attack and topple the clerical Iranian regime (Bahgat 2006, 318).

Predominantly fueling the feud between Iran and the United States is the Iranian rhetoric towards Israel. As argued by Beeman (2006):

[Iran's] nuclear ambitions [under the Shah] could have been inflated and denigrated exactly the same way that they are being inflated and denigrated today. But the United States was blissfully unconcerned. The big difference today is that Iran is now perceived to be a threat to Israel, and this fuels much of the threat of military action.

The United States is Israel's largest benefactor, and Israel the United States only reliable ally in the Middle East. Any perceived threat towards Israel is one that the Americans will also react to.

Ultimately, the United States acts as the global arbiter when deciding which nations are able to cross the nuclear threshold. In this context, it has allowed Israel to develop nuclear weapons while denying Iran the same privileges. Cohen & Miller (2010) observe that since 1969, the United States has worked with Israel to provide "significant diplomatic cover" with respect to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and development of its nuclear program. It was on September 26 1969, according to documents leaked years later, that the Nixon administration had signed an agreement with Israel (Cohen and

Miller 2010, Karpin 37). The United States government at the time realized the value of having a strong and militarily capable ally in the region (Cohen & Miller 2010). The agreement mandated that if Israel did not openly flaunt its nuclear ambitions to the international community, the United States would “tolerate and shield” (Cohen and Miller 2010) their program.

In other words, the pressure from the United States was a root motivation for the Israelis to have a policy of nuclear ambiguity. Israel chose to hide its nuclear program in part because they believed if the Arabs had known of its existence, those weapons would be targeted first in any conflict (Maoz 72). Perhaps a more significant reason, however, was that the United States motivated the Israelis to continue their policy of nuclear ambiguity. In return for their silence, the United States accepted the possibility of an Israeli nuclear weapons program and allowed them to continue their program unimpeded. Cohen and Frankel (1987) observe that: “Israel seems to have achieved the enviable position of enjoying all the presumed benefits of nuclear deterrence without any of its liabilities” (18). Where Iran has been levied with sanctions and been the subject of multiple IAEA investigations, Israel has been able to act relatively freely with respect to its nuclear program. Israel is the only state apart from the “great powers whose right to possess a doomsday weapon is accepted by the most influential countries” (Karpin 37-38). The tacit agreement from the United States has allowed for this situation to exist and continue.

Conversely, Iran has been subject to threats, investigations, and sanctions. At its very core, this is due to the involvement of the United States. As Bahgat (2006) remarks, “International isolation and tense relations with the United States...complicated Iran’s

efforts to rebuild its nuclear program” (310). In addition to the threats and the sanctions, the United States has stalled the transfer of potential nuclear weapon components to Iran from other states. According to Bahgat (2006), a German multinational company along with several other foreign governments withdrew from Iran due to intense pressure from the Americans (310). Further, in 1991, Iran attempted to purchase nuclear equipment from two separate foreign governments: a research reactor from India and a nuclear fuel fabrication plant from Argentina; both transfers were obstructed by “high-level intervention from Washington” (Timmerman 1995). The above examples demonstrate that the United States has played a central role in the development of both Israeli and Iranian nuclear program development, albeit in radically different ways.

The decision-making and intervention of the United States is the ultimate explanation for the difference in the progress of nuclear development of both Israel and Iran. Without the support of the United States, Israel would not have had the assurance of safety and diplomatic security in order to develop a nuclear program. If not for the intervention of the United States, the argument can be made that Iran would possess nuclear weapons today. Nuclear ambiguity, rhetoric and behaviour only serve to explain part of the difference in scrutiny between Iran and Israel. Israel’s ‘nuclear ambiguity’ policy may serve as a deterrent to Arab states and it may have succeeded in hiding its motivations from the greater international community. But it is the reinforcement from the United States that allows Israel to maintain its official policy. Meanwhile, Iran behaved similarly to Israel in terms of ambiguity. However, because of their tense relations and Iran’s rhetoric and behaviour against Israel, the United States has blocked the transfer of nuclear components to Iran, levied sanctions against Tehran, and has

repeatedly threatened to overthrow its regime. Ultimately, the United States is responsible for the outcomes of both states' nuclear programs, not policies of nuclear ambiguity.

The point here is not that nuclear ambiguity is a useless exercise; it has in fact helped secure the survival of the Israeli state. The emphasis is that it has mattered very little in explaining the nuclear development of the two regimes when taking everything else into account. Iran has, like Israel, remained ambiguous about its nuclear program and has in fact done more than Israel to appease the international community. Despite these efforts, there is wide gap in scrutiny between the two nations. It is primarily because of the United States -- in combination with Iran's missteps in rhetoric and behaviour -- that this gap exists and continues to exist.

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Notes

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