

Israel-Iran Nuclear Crisis: A Diplomatic Opportunity

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COLIN FLINT, TODD ROBINSON AND ELIZABETH PHILIPP, JAN 11 2013

Although it is uncertain whether Iran intends to create a nuclear weapon, the international community is unified in suspicion of their civilian program. A nuclear-armed Iran could create a military catastrophe for the region, potentially demanding a militarized response from neighbors and other states. The case of Iran, however, is not without opportunity for resolution. Instead, by publicly recognizing Iran's latent proliferation, an opportunity for diplomatic progress may be facilitated. As a regional neighbor and ideological rival, Israel both is most significantly threatened by Iran and has the preeminent opportunity to reverse this potential crisis situation. Through engaging Iran in public nuclear diplomacy, Israel would enable diplomatic progress at four levels: for Israel uniquely, bilaterally for Israel and Iran, regionally, and for the global nuclear nonproliferation regime. For nuclear diplomacy to be effective in achieving its political and diplomatic ends, they should be transparent, held publicly, and engaged with a true intent to reach agreement toward a combination of disarmament, non-proliferation, or strategic limitation. These talks could be introduced through a multilateral forum such as the Conference on Disarmament, or conducted bilaterally, although transparently, between the two states.

Before we begin the argument for why public nuclear diplomacy between Iran and Israel would be beneficial, it is crucial to clarify a few important points about the nature of the current situation that would motivate and shape such an endeavor. In contrast to historical examples of nuclear weapon-related dialogue between states where each state was at roughly the same level of technological development (the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, or Brazil and Argentina more recently), Israel and Iran currently have vastly different levels of nuclear weapons capability. Israel has one of the most technologically advanced nuclear arsenals in the world, and has been capable of producing weapons for at least forty years. Iran, on the other hand, does not currently possess nuclear weapons. However, there is strong suspicion that it is developing a program, and is at the very least in the process of developing its civilian nuclear capabilities in a manner that would enable a weapons capability at a later date, or what is often termed "latent proliferation". At some point, Iran may decide to actually produce and test nuclear weapons, but this is still, by most estimates, several years away, and would fundamentally change the nature of any potential dialogue between the two countries. Thus, by using the term public nuclear diplomacy this paper seeks to capture the complexity of the current situation in which Israel has nuclear weapons but does not admit it, and Iran is behaving in a way that generates legitimate suspicion about its proliferation intentions. The final note to make is that the focus of this essay is on the potential actions of Israel, and the diplomatic benefits that may ensue. This does not mean we see Iran as either blameless or an impotent actor. Clearly Iran could do more to allay suspicions about its potential proliferation and any diplomacy would require "two to tango."

What are the potential benefits of public nuclear diplomacy for Israel? Currently, Israel is an undeclared nuclear state, with a deliberate policy of nuclear opacity, or amimut. Israel is increasingly isolated in the international arena because of its illegal building program in occupied territories and its blockade of Gaza. The prominent role of right-wing parties in its domestic and foreign policy-making has promoted a security agenda based on existential threat and military force. Rather than using Iran's latent proliferation as a reason for delivering more of the same, this is a moment to change the dynamics and for Israel to play by the rules of the international diplomatic community. This would require the dramatic step of Israel acknowledging its nuclear weapons program and sitting across the table with historic adversaries. Would this be a sign of weakness that threatens the existence of Israel or a clever counter-move that changes the geopolitics of the region and provides for national security by enhancing the diplomatic role of Israel with its neighbors? This paper argues that it would be the latter. At best, nuclear diplomacy could lead to

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peaceful agreement with hostile neighbors or (and hopefully after good faith negotiations) would expose Iran as a new nuclear pariah providing a sounder moral and diplomatic basis for a military response.

The benefit of public nuclear diplomacy for Iran-Israel relations rests on the simple Churchillian adage that “to jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war.” For both countries, engaging in talks would alter the perception that they are more interested in war than diplomacy. It is election season in both Iran and Israel, and the dangers of nationalistic tub-thumping are high. Public diplomacy would change the game of confrontation, and reduce the likelihood of either Israel or Iran (or both) to be the isolated as international pariahs that they are now in their own different ways. Reducing tensions and the possibility of war is inherently a good thing. Public nuclear diplomacy would demonstrate more transparency for both states and enhance their ability to be valuable regional players. The ability to lead discussions that have positive regional ramifications, with Israel in the vanguard of talking with Iran and vice versa, would increase the prestige of both and enhance their diplomatic roles.

And so that brings us to the potential benefits for the region. Israel-Iran nuclear diplomacy would mean that the region as a whole is in dialog and less polarized around the issue of Israel. Such dialog would most likely secure the notion of the existence of the state of Israel while also demanding that Israel needs to act within international norms: specifically in recognizing its nuclear program and confronting and reversing its behavior in the occupied territories. Taking an optimistic approach, such talks may also be the last opportunity of establishing a Palestinian state and fostering peace through a two-state solution. The two issues of nuclear confrontation and a Palestinian state are inseparable. By not acknowledging its nuclear weapons program Israel defines itself as a state that does not act in good faith. Furthermore, it acts in a way that argues might is right, with nuclear weapons as the ultimate “might”. By denying the rights and needs of others, Israel creates a perpetual sense of insecurity that seemingly demands, or at least justifies, nuclear weapons. This is a particularly nasty manifestation of the security dilemma. Breaking the cycle through diplomacy would enhance Israel’s security by leading the way towards non-proliferation and ideally disarmament in the region, through the establishment of regional diplomatic cooperation tied to the perennial security problem of the recognition of a Palestinian state. The flip side is more of the same: Undeclared nuclear weapons backing up an aggressive nationalist agenda to produce a situation that gives little hope for security in the long-term.

Public Israel-Iran nuclear diplomacy would also have positive ramifications for the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. As a stable democracy, staunch ally of the United States, and secretive possessor of one of the world’s largest and most technologically advanced nuclear weapons programs, Israel has long represented a serious counter-example to the success of the global nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime. While complete and verifiable disarmament of Israel’s nuclear weapons program, including accession to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the signing of an IAEA Full Scope Safeguards Agreement, remains the most advantageous and optimistic outcome, it is unlikely that such an outcome will be achieved without some intermediate step(s) being taken by Israel, either on their own, or as a component of bilateral, multilateral, or international non-proliferation efforts. Public disarmament or arms limitation talks with Iran may represent just such an opportunity. Iran would also benefit in such talks in the form of reduced risk of military attack by Israel or the United States, retention of the benefits of NPT membership, and catalyzing diplomacy with Israel on other issues.

Talks between Israel and Iran may seem far-fetched, but on the other hand such unlikely developments may be the new normal for non-proliferation diplomacy. Previously, nuclear legitimacy was found only within the bounds of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Unfortunately, because the NPT has failed to incorporate states such as Israel, India, and Pakistan, there is a need to look for other ways to “legitimize” these existing nuclear programs so that some sense of regulation and oversight may be found. The US-India 123 agreement was an example of such an endeavor. While such an agreement is not likely to happen between the US and Israel, perhaps encouraging Israel to engage in public disarmament talks with Iran may be another way forward in what could become an eclectic or a la carte approach to combating nuclear proliferation.

Although outlining benefits of public nuclear diplomacy between Israel and Iran, and even suggesting that there is a possibility of such talks, exposes the authors to accusations of wild optimism and naivety, this paper has argued that there is a responsibility to encourage such a pathway, as silence may be interpreted as acquiescence towards the current dynamic of vitriol backed up by nuclear militarism. The alternative of public nuclear diplomacy is one that

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reduces the risks associated with nuclear proliferation, has positive implications for the long-term security of both states, and enables regional diplomacy and peace, while also reflecting the new mechanisms of the global non-proliferation regime. At the very least it should be placed on the agenda of possibilities and prevent the risk of nuclear proliferation and confrontation being identified as the only possibility. It is important that the term “choice” is emphasized: politicians in Israel and Iran, and their citizens, as well as regional and global diplomatic players, have a responsibility to seek options other than nuclear proliferation. That will require these two secretive countries facilitating a view into their national security apparatus while sitting around the same table. In the long history of international diplomacy stranger things have happened.

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