Abstract: The threat of an Iranian nuclear weapon has become a growing area of concern in Israeli security debates. Using the securitization framework of the Copenhagen School, as expressed by Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen, this political trend can be explained. Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons program has been securitized by Benjamin Netanyahu and his cohorts – primarily through the use of Holocaust imagery and rhetoric. This has been done in order to justify a more offensive military posture for Israel and a more hawkish foreign policy. Although the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran certainly poses a threat to the state of Israel, it is not an existential threat and therefore is not severe enough to warrant the ‘security’ label.

Although many countries have labelled the Iranian nuclear program a threat to international security, not one has condemned it as vehemently as the state of Israel has. Israel’s leaders have pushed the issue of Iran’s supposed pursuit of nuclear weaponry to the forefront of their security concerns. Despite the fact that Iran’s nuclear program does not seem to be an existential threat to Israeli sovereignty, it has been labelled as such. By invoking imagery of the Holocaust, Benjamin Netanyahu is able to successfully and continuously securitize the Iranian nuclear program in the eyes of the Israeli public and political elites, as well as the international community to a lesser extent. Although the prospect of nuclear-armed Iran only threatens Israel indirectly, securitizing the issue has allowed the Israeli government to respond to the moderate threat of Iran’s nuclear program more aggressively than otherwise warranted.

There are three leading interpretations of what constitutes a national security issue. In the objective view, security is the absence of an existential threat to state sovereignty,
whereas in the subjective view, security is the absence of fear for state sovereignty.¹ The discursive understanding of security suggests that security is a speech act invoked by political actors to make an issue one of state sovereignty. Thus, calling something a security issue makes it a security issue.² In this process, called securitization, a securitizing actor initiates the speech act, which is then either accepted or rejected by the audience. The aim of securitization is for the sovereign to be granted the use of extraordinary measures to counter the issue at hand. In the case of the Iranian nuclear program, Iran is threatening the state of Israel; Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli government are the securitizing actors; and their audience is both the Israeli and Jewish political elites and the Israeli public and international community.

Iran’s Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the war with Iraq that followed, isolated Iran from the international community. A lack of international support during the war, despite Iraq’s aggression and use of chemical weapons, has caused Iranian leadership to be weary of international institutions and to believe that only they can take care of themselves.³ This mentality, as well as a need for alternative energy sources, has caused Iran to grow its nuclear program in the years following the war. In defiance of several Security Council resolutions, Iran continues to enrich uranium, which can be used for either nuclear reactors (as Iran claims) or warheads (as Israel and other countries claim).⁴ Evidence, such as Iranian designs for a nuclear warhead,⁵ seems to suggest that Iran is developing nuclear weapons capabilities. Although the International Atomic Energy Agency says there is no evidence of an Iranian weapons program, that discussion finds itself beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵ Ibid, 17, 22
The Israeli government is extremely concerned with the prospect of nuclear-armed Iran and the many implications it would have for Israel. Benjamin Netanyahu, the current prime minister of Israel, has labelled the Iranian nuclear program a threat to Israel’s security to the highest degree. Netanyahu believes that Iran does not represent a rational actor and will not be deterred by Israel’s own nuclear arsenal. According to him, Iran’s religious fervour and hatred towards the Jewish people and the state of Israel may motivate its policy more than the fear of mutually assured destruction, ultimately leading to a nuclear strike against Israel.\(^6\) In this view, the Iranian nuclear program is a direct, existential threat to the state of Israel.

Netanyahu has been able to successfully securitize the Iranian nuclear program by drawing upon Israel’s collective memory of the Holocaust. Netanyahu frequently brings up the Holocaust in his political speeches, usually in tandem with the Iranian nuclear program. Objectively, Israel seems fairly secure, as it is among both the wealthiest and best-armed countries in the Middle East. Moreover, Israel is the only country in the region to possess nuclear weapons, giving it a significant advantage in any conventional war. Subjectively, however, Israelis seem to feel very insecure. Although 85% of the population has faith in the Israel Defense Force’s ability to defend them, a comparable number fear being the victim of a terrorist attack. Furthermore, more than 40% of Israelis fear an unconventional attack, such as a nuclear strike.\(^7\) Despite having knowledge of the prowess of their military, it is clear that many Israelis remain fearful for their personal and national security.

Daniel Bar-Tal explains this contradiction using a socio-psychological approach to (in)security. In this understanding, security is subjective but is heavily shaped by discursive factors and how a society understands its history. According to Bar-Tal, “…part of the

reasons for the insecurity … lie in the cultural-societal-political climate of the society as reflected in the information provided by leaders … [and] the imparted collective memory.”

This collective memory is heavily influenced by the shadow of the Holocaust, which has permeated Israel’s political rhetoric since the state’s inception in 1948. This has created a ‘siege mentality’ within both the state and in the Jewish diaspora, which manifests itself as a belief in a constant existential threat towards the Jewish people. By maintaining the view that they are the victims, the Israeli government is able to justify morally questionable acts in the name of self-defence.

In order to successfully securitize the Iranian nuclear program in the view of the Israeli public, Netanyahu frequently invokes Holocaust imagery. Even in a speech for Holocaust Remembrance Day, Netanyahu said that; “a nuclear armed Iran is an existential threat to the state of Israel.” He brings up the topic of Iran here, not only to securitize it, but to also apply the lessons of the Holocaust to it. These lessons are twofold: Firstly that the life of the Jewish people is at stake, and secondly, that Israel cannot rely on anyone else for help. Applied here, this means that a nuclear-armed Iran means the death of the Jewish people and that only the state of Israel can be trusted to stop that. The obvious implication, therefore, is that Israel should be willing to act unilaterally against Iran, even without the support of the United States.

It is important to note the significance that Israeli leaders play in the securitization process. Israeli politicians represent one of the largest sources of information on security for the Israeli public. 82% of Israelis rely on the political leadership for this information.

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8 Ibid, 231
is considered a security issue by the Israeli public is largely dependent on what their leaders securitize, which emphasizes the extent to which the speech act of securitization has power..

Netanyahu is not the only one to use this kind of rhetoric; President Shimon Peres has said that when dealing with Iran, Israel “must learn the lessons of the Holocaust.”\textsuperscript{12} The analogy tries to demonstrate that just as Hitler’s hatred towards the Jews was irrational, so is Iran’s hatred towards the state of Israel. This is meant to show that Iran will not be deterred by the prospect of mutually assured destruction and that Israel must do everything in her power to prevent them from constructing a nuclear weapon. This discrepancy also illustrates that Peres and the other securitizing actors do not sincerely believe that Iran represents an existential threat and are simply using Holocaust rhetoric to securitize the issue.

Although the Iranian nuclear program certainly poses a threat to the state of Israel, it does not do so in the total and existential way described by Netanyahu. The Iranian leadership and selectorate are not irrational, as Netanyahu claims, and it is highly unlikely that they would launch a nuclear strike against Israel without extreme provocation. The main impetus for the Iranian nuclear program is self-defence. The program was started as a response to the Iran-Iraq war and currently seems to be aimed at deterring aggression from the United States and Israel.\textsuperscript{13} Launching an attack against Israel would mitigate this deterrence, as it would certainly be met with a severe response by both the United States and Israel.

To say that Iran would risk its own total annihilation in order to attack Israel is tantamount to saying that Iranian leadership Israel’s destruction above all else. This line of thinking, purported by the Israeli government, is as absurd as it is self-important. Even if one were to take statements made by former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad suggesting

\textsuperscript{12} Shimon Peres, “Holocaust Remembrance Day Address” (Speech, Jerusalem, April 18\textsuperscript{th}, 2012.), Haaretz. http://www.haaretz.com

\textsuperscript{13} Ephraim Kam, \textit{A Nuclear Iran: What Does it Mean, and What Can be Done}, (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2007). 51
that Israel should be “wiped off the map”\textsuperscript{14} at face value, the destruction of the state of Israel could still not be the sole motivating factor for the existence of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The fact that the Iranians are willing to negotiate over their nuclear program\textsuperscript{15} suggests that they value the easing of sanctions over nuclear capabilities. Iran may seek Israel’s destruction, but there is nothing to suggest that it would risk its own obliteration in order to achieve it.

There are other implications of a nuclear-armed Iran, however, that are very problematic for Israel. The deterrence provided by a nuclear arsenal will embolden Iran and allow it to act with impunity in the region. Although it is unlikely that Iran would attack Israel itself, Iranian proxy groups like Hezbollah would likely increase their activity against Israel.\textsuperscript{16} In addition, Iran would greatly expand its regional influence, which could upset the interests of Israel and the nation’s allies. Lastly, if Iran were to gain a nuclear weapon it could set a dangerous precedent in the region and could cause competing powers, such as Saudi Arabia, to seek nuclear weapons of their own. It is against these threats that Israeli leadership is seeking to defend itself. Once Iran attains a nuclear weapon it will be impossible to reverse the situation. Thus, in the view of the Israeli leadership, it is imperative that they do everything in their power to prevent Iran from successfully building such a weapon. In order to have all of his options on the table, Netanyahu instead needed to successfully securitize the issue as one of existential importance.

This process of securitization, undertaken by Netanyahu and other members of the Knesset, seems to have succeeded. Moreover, AIPAC, the preeminent Jewish lobbying group in the United States and an excellent bellwether of what issues are of greatest concern to the

\textsuperscript{16} Ephraim Kam, \textit{A Nuclear Iran: What Does it Mean, and What Can be Done}, (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2007).55
Jewish diaspora, ranks Iran as one Israel’s foremost security concerns. According to their website “a nuclear armed Iran would pose a direct threat to … national security interests”\(^\text{17}\) of the state of Israel. Barack Obama has acknowledged that the Iranian nuclear program is one of the primary concerns of AIPAC, when he discussed the issue in his 2012 address to the group. Obama not only emphasised his administration’s efforts to avert Iranian acquisition of a bomb but also said that “a nuclear-armed Iran is completely counter to Israel’s security interests.”\(^\text{18}\) Obama put so much focus on the Iranian nuclear program because the Israeli leadership has been able to successfully securitize it in the eyes of both Israel and Israeli and diaspora Jews, which include members of the AIPAC.

The Israeli government has worked tirelessly to securitize the Iranian nuclear program in order to justify using any means necessary to prevent Iran from attaining a nuclear weapon. Although the Iranian nuclear program does not directly represent an existential threat to the state of Israel, Netanyahu has securitized it as such so that he can do everything in his power in order to stop it. He has succeeded in securitizing the issue through the use of numerous speech acts and constant analogies to the Holocaust, which resonate very strongly with Jews, both at home and abroad. This allows both himself and his allies in the United States to act unilaterally against the moderate security threat that is the Iranian nuclear program. Specifically, it has caused both Israel and other nations to strongly oppose negotiation over Iran’s nuclear program, working to ensure that no negotiation is reached.

Bibliography


