Hamas Massacre Proves Iran is Existential Threat

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 29.11.2023

For the past two decades there has been a debate raging within Israel regarding the nature of the threat posed by a nuclear Iran. Some have argued that a nuclear-armed Iran would pose an existential threat to Israel, while others believed that it would indeed be severe, but not necessarily existential.

For many years, Benjamin Netanyahu led the 'existential threat' camp, drawing an analogy between Israel's current situation vis-a-vis Iran, to that of Europe in 1938, facing Nazi Germany. In this view, Israel stands before a fateful decision: will it act to confront its enemies on time despite the immediate costs, or will it hesitate and allow another holocaust?

Others in Israel's security establishment and political leadership rejected this analogy as wild and inappropriate to the current situation. Leading among them was Ehud Barak. Though he cooperated with Netanyahu in taking a strong stance against Iran as defense minister from 2009-2013, he consistently opposed the idea that they were dealing with an existential threat. As he relates in his 2018 autobiography:

"I was especially upset by Bibi's increasing use of Holocaust imagery in describing the threat from Iran… We're not in Europe in 1937. Or 1947. If it is a 'Holocaust,' what's our response: to fold up and go back to the diaspora? If Iran gets a bomb, it'll be bad. Very bad. But we'll still be here. And we will find a way of dealing with the new reality."

This seemingly semantic debate has very real policy implications, including the extent to which Israel should be willing to go in order to prevent Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold. If this is an existential threat, then Israel must be willing to do everything in its power to prevent it – including, if necessary, taking action that carries the risk of a broader regional war and even if it means acting in defiance of the preferences of a US administration. But if it is a major threat, but not existential, then there are limits to what Israel should be willing to do, such as not acting without at least American acquiescence; weighing the value of a strike against the price of a war with Hezbollah and direct Iranian missile

strikes; and ultimately, considering that instead of a costly war, Israel might shift toward a policy of attempting to deter Iran from ever using its newfound weaponry.

The Face of Evil

The massacre of October the 7th, however, should settle this debate once and for all by clarifying for all sides what existential threat really means. Because its seems that even those who claim a nuclear Iran would constitute such a threat – Netanyahu himself included – have not taken themselves seriously enough, nor acted accordingly.

Before October 7th, we had trouble believing that the genocidal evil that we witnessed that day really existed. We may have said that it exists, we may have recited slogans saying that it exists, but we didn't entirely understand the meaning or the significance of it. We didn't really internalize that there are, in fact, people who would happily give their lives just so they could murder Jews; people for whom their greatest dream is to "destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and children—on a single day," no matter what the cost.

Yes, we knew that this was possible in theory, as a matter of history. Certainly, in the country founded in the shadow of the ashes of the Holocaust, Israelis remember that the Nazi's were willing to risk it all to murder just one more Jew. But with the passage of time, we forgot that this was a real thing. The clarity of the lessons learned has been eroded over time, to the point which when it became a practical issue again, we didn't really know what was required.

But now, after October 7th, we have again witnessed the face of evil. We have encountered it anew and must internalize its meaning anew. The meaning is that we can no longer claim that Iran is animated primarily by national interests, or that its threats are mere rhetoric, not to be taken seriously. We can no longer claim that Iran couldn't possibly risk the survival of the Islamist regime by undertaking a nuclear attack on Israel, or that it would never risk the destruction of entire Iranian cities that would result from an Israeli counter-attack. Rather, the meaning is that it could and it most likely would.

The Price of Error: National Annihilation

The Hamas massacre must make clear that people who are consumed by Islamist ideologies, be it the Sunni or Shiite versions, really are willing to commit collective suicide if they could only take Israel down with them. And if we do not recognize this truth and instead continue to believe that our enemies hold the same value system as we do, we will pay the price for this strategic failure, and the price is national annihilation. Because if Israel fails to see this threat with clarity and act appropriately, there will be no more politicians to apologize for the blunder and resign, and there will be no one to demand a committee of public inquiry and no one to report the findings to. This is the meaning of existential threat; it is the type of threat that forces us to choose whether to continue existing or not.

For years, Israel has wrestled with the question of where precisely is the red line beyond which decisive action is imperative. Twenty years ago, some said the very existence of clandestine uranium enrichment facilities justified action. Later, it was the accumulation of any highly enriched uranium, meaning to 20% purity. By 2012, Israel's red line was the accumulation of 250 kg of 20% enriched uranium. According the most recent IAEA reports, Iran currently has over 500 kg of 20% and an additional 128 kg and counting of uranium enriched to 60%. As of the outset of 2023, Israel's new red line has apparently become a point just short of military grade, meaning 90%. At each juncture, the question was raised: "why act now if we can continue to deter Iran from any further progress?"; "there is still time to act before they have enough for a bomb, and then some more time before they can weaponize it." Iran now has anywhere from a few weeks to a few months between it and an operational weapon, given a decision to break out. Perhaps this was good enough before October 7th. Today, it should be considered well beyond the red line.

Now is the time to revisit the roots of the so-called 'Begin doctrine'. It was Menachem Begin, who lived in a generation which had not yet forgotten the reality of genocidal evil, who wrote in 1978 the following passage and applied it in practice just a few years later: "The lesson today and for the future is: First, if an enemy of the Jews comes and says that he desires, with all his heart and blood, to destroy them – do not dismiss him, do not disparage him, do not doubt him. Rather you must take his intentions with completely sincerity, and take his utterances with all the gravity they embody. Believe him. This enemy wants to destroy the Jews. You must prevent from him the power to destroy them. You

must prepare yourself every day for the time of action, but you must never again say: ‘They don’t really mean it.’ ”

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