

Essay 7 - Israel's Current Security Threats

- **The major existential threat to Israel today is Iran's drive to obtain nuclear weapons.**
- **Hamas and other armed groups pose a serious threat from Gaza.**
- **Hezbollah poses a major threat from Lebanon.**

Today Israel faces a number of distinct security threats.

Major threats to Israel include the Iranian nuclear threat, direct military threats on its borders, and the threat of terrorist infiltration.

The foremost security threat to Israel today is Iran's drive to obtain nuclear weapons.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported in November 2011, that after studying the evidence for several years, the evidence that Iran had a nuclear weapons programme was 'credible'. Iran has repeatedly been caught building major nuclear facilities in secret, in breach of its Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations, and is subject to several UN Security Council resolutions requiring it to stop.

Contrary to Iranian claims that its nuclear programme is entirely for civilian purposes, through the 1980s and 1990s Iran was buying materials and designs for nuclear facilities in secret.

In 2002, Iranian opposition groups disclosed details of major nuclear sites under construction which Iran had kept hidden in direct contravention of its international commitments. They included a uranium enrichment facility at Natanz and a heavy water production plant and reactor at Arak that could produce weapons grade plutonium. Neither is necessary for Iran's civil nuclear power programme. In 2009, Britain, France and the US exposed another secret enrichment facility under a mountain at Fordow, too small for civilian fuel but big enough to produce weapons grade uranium.

The IAEA issued a report in November 2011 with detailed evidence of Iran's nuclear weapons programme. It showed a structured programme until 2003, and suspected activities after that. In defiance of binding UNSC resolutions, Iran continued to expand its enrichment capacity, to enrich at levels closer to weapons grade, and to continue with the construction at Arak, until agreeing a temporary pause in return for sanctions relief in November 2013.

There is no doubt that an Iranian nuclear bomb would pose a major threat to Israel. The Iranian regime – despite the 'moderate' image fostered by the present president Hassan Rouhani – remains committed to the destruction of Israel. The interim agreement concluded by the major powers with Iran in 2013 is controversial. Its defenders claim that it is a genuine step towards Iranian nuclear disarmament. Sceptics however are concerned that it has not forced Iran to dismantle any part of its nuclear infrastructure, and actually allows Iran to continue developing some of its nuclear capabilities, inching ever closer to breakout capability. Sceptics point to the failure of similar negotiations to prevent North Korea from acquiring a military nuclear capability.

Nevertheless, the commitment of the USA, UK and other countries to the negotiations has made it almost impossible for Israel to contemplate unilateral action against Iran whilst diplomacy is on-going to reach a comprehensive agreement.

An unlikely side-effect of the Iranian nuclear threat has been to increase common interests between Israel and Sunni Muslim states, particularly Gulf State such as Saudi Arabia, who feel similarly threatened by Iran.

Hamas poses a serious threat from Gaza.

What is now known as the Gaza Strip is an area of British Mandate Palestine that was invaded and occupied by Egypt after the British left and Israel declared its independence in 1948. Egypt always governed Gaza as a separate entity, and it was never integrated into Egypt. Egypt retained control of the Strip until it was captured by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War.

In 2005 Israel's then prime minister Ariel Sharon withdrew Israel unilaterally from the Gaza Strip. This included forcibly removing 9,000 Israeli residents (mainly in an area called Gush Katif).

In 2007, fighting between Hamas and Palestinian Authority (PA) forces resulted in Hamas forcibly taking over the Gaza Strip. Since that date this territory has been the main source of attacks on Israel.

Since 2006 more than 6,000 rockets have been fired on Israel from Gaza. While these firings have escalated in the course of Israeli military operations in Gaza (Operation Cast Lead in 2009 and Operation Pillar of Defence in 2012) these interventions have resulted in drastic reductions in rocket attacks in their aftermath. There were 158 rockets in 2009 following Cast Lead compared to 1,159 in 2008. There were 36 in 2013 following Pillar of Defence compared to 787 in 2012.

The Gaza Strip has also been the origin of raids designed to kidnap Israeli soldiers for use as bargaining tools. Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was held in Gaza for five years until released in 2011 in exchange for 1,027 Palestinian prisoners, mainly convicted terrorists

As significant as the numbers is the increased range and sophistication of the rockets employed. In many cases these are not, as often claimed, 'home-made' devices, but rather Iranian-manufactured missiles which were smuggled into Gaza through the tunnels from Egypt. Palestinian armed groups in the Gaza Strip, such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, now have rockets with a range of up to 60km, bringing Tel Aviv and Jerusalem within range.

As well as carrying out military operations aimed at curbing the threat, Israel has developed Iron Dome, a unique missile defence system which intercepts incoming rockets. Since its deployment, Iron Dome has intercepted hundreds of rockets targetted at Israeli towns and cities.

The destabilisation of Egypt has increased lawlessness in the Sinai Peninsula, creating a new security threat to Israel. The Sinai has been used as a base by armed Islamist groups to launch incursions into Israel and in a small number of incidents, to fire rockets and the southern city of Eilat.

Hezbollah poses a major threat from Lebanon

Until 1982, the main threat from Lebanon came from the PLO, and it was terrorist attacks from this quarter that provoked Israel's 1982 incursion into Lebanon. A tragic example of this occurred in May 1974, when a group of 100 high school students from Safed were taken hostage by a band of PLO terrorists while on a class trip in the nearby town of Ma'alot. The terrorists murdered 22 of the children before they were overrun. Today, the threat from Lebanon comes from Hezbollah, a Shiite militia closely allied to Iran and the Assad regime in Syria.

Following the end of the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah was able to position its forces close to the Israeli border. Despite a June 2000 certification by the United Nations that Israel had withdrawn from all Lebanese territory, Hezbollah justifies its armed organisation by claiming its goals is to "liberate or recover occupied lands".

Hezbollah has been implicated in a large number of terrorist attacks, both against its political opponents in Lebanon and against Israeli and Jewish targets abroad. A notorious example was the 1994 bombing of AMIA, a Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires. Following a bombing which killed five Israeli tourists and their Bulgarian bus driver in Burgas in July 2012, the European Union added the military wing of Hezbollah to its list of proscribed terrorist organisations.

Today Hezbollah is the most powerful military and political force in Lebanon, dominating South Lebanon, and playing a critical role in the Lebanese government. A UN force intended to prevent the rearming of Hezbollah has proved ineffective, and Hezbollah rockets continue to be a threat.

However, the Syrian civil war has shifted the terms of debate. Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime (indeed, its commitment of large numbers of fighters to fight for the regime) has alienated it from most Sunni Muslims, including Palestinians, as well as other Lebanese who oppose Syrian domination of their country. Its intervention may also have weakened it militarily as the Lebanon conflict takes its toll of its forces. Hezbollah targets have been struck by terrorist bombings in Beirut.

The Syrian Civil War has also brought armed extremists affiliated to Jihadist groups and Al-Qaeda close to Israel's northern borders, presenting a potential future threat to Israel's security.

Would you like to know more about Israel and to get more involved in supporting Israel? This email is one of a series of educational emails from We Believe in Israel, the grassroots initiative of BICOM. We Believe in Israel is a UK grassroots network of people united in believing in the right of the State of Israel to live in peace and security. We aim to support and facilitate activists who seek through local engagement and campaigning to create a more complete understanding of Israel and its situation in the UK. You can join We Believe in Israel's mailing list [here](#). Our website is www.webelieveinIsrael.org.uk. BICOM's website, with all the latest news and analysis about Israel is www.bicom.org.uk.

