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Fear and Insecurity

Competing Narratives of the Iran-Israel Relationship

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Abstract

Years after the Islamic Republic of Iran resumed its nuclear development program, Israeli leaders began constructing a narrative aimed at instilling in their polity the fear of Iran as an existential threat to the Jewish State. Building upon Israel's geopolitical insecurity, politicians, assisted by societal elites, repeatedly claimed that the imminent acquisition of a bomb by Iran's religious fundamentalist regime undermined Israel's security and threatened the stability of the world order. This project examines how Israeli leaders crafted a narrative in which Iran's rulers sought the destruction of Israel; how the Israeli public internalized this perception of Iran as an enemy; and how Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu incorporated this message into his foreign policy agenda and used it in efforts to secure the support of international allies. Through the lens of securitization theory, this project analyzes primary source documents to show the divergence between the narrative's content and historical facts. In doing so, it highlights how perception eclipses reality when a powerful securitizing actor claiming exclusive access to material information identifies a threat source and publicly promotes its danger. It then examines how Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu strategically embraced populist strategies to advocate for extraordinary action against Iran and to bolster his status as a leader and national protector. Taking advantage of Israel's failure in the Second Lebanon War and Iran's election of a radical and bombastic president, Netanyahu chose resonant tropes – misusing history, recasting Holocaust memory, and fashioning an overarching moral imperative – to create a permanent crisis and secure Israelis' acquiescence. By 2015, however, he had failed to convince international powers that a negotiated deal suspending Iran's nuclear enrichment program would make Israel and the world less safe. This project contributes to our understanding of current and future developments in the Israel-Iran enmity, both predictable and unanticipated.

For Anne.

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“A nuclear Iran is an existential threat on the State of Israel.”
--*Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli Prime Minister*

“Even if Iran got a nuclear bomb, it would not waste it on Israel.”
--*Daniel Kurtzer, former United States Ambassador to Israel*

Introduction

Understanding the modern conflict between Israel and Iran begins with the proposition that it is rooted in the political narratives that each nation's leaders tell their polity about the other. These narratives account for the relational history, the global context in which the nations confront one another, and the domestic conditions within each country, including cultural, economic, and political norms. A narrative, which according to Peter Brooks, "is one of the large categories or systems we use in our negotiations with reality," enables a leader to answer such questions as how did the enmity develop, why does or should it persist, is there a danger associated with continued conflict, and should something be done to change the situation?¹ Its content is both descriptive and normative, but its purpose is argumentative.

The political narrator seeks to craft a story that will resonate with his listeners so that they will support his leadership and his policies. He chooses content that will deliver a message or messages that promote his objectives. His choices will reflect characteristics of his personal identity, such as his experience, ambitions, biases, ideology, and motivations, among other traits. The salience of his narrative, in effect its political traction, will depend upon the identity of his audience.

To be sure, the proposition that narrative is constructed in a dynamic process based upon personal choices rather than an account of events and the responses they occasion is not consonant with traditional international relations theory. It suggests that narrative content need not be entirely or even largely factual, or that the response it

¹ While Brooks is referring to literary narrative, his description is applicable to political discourse in which leaders offer citizens a compelling story to secure their support for their leadership and policies. See discussion *infra* on the power of the political narrative. Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, Revised edition (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992).

elicits need not be rational. In other words, the narrative that motivates or justifies the foreign policies pursued by one nation toward another is not the inevitable result of events that control the narrative. While there are events over which actors have no control, there are narratives that influence actions and shape the perceptions of observers. Moreover, there are often different narratives that address the same temporal space, and sometimes they compete for public acceptance. At a minimum, analysis of the difference in narratives about inter-nation conflict allows us to examine and compare the forces, both objective and subjective, that shaped the conflict. This project undertakes such an analysis, examining the Israeli narrative of its conflict with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Before elaborating on the details of my study, it is worthwhile considering a comparison between two paradigmatic narrative versions of Israel's relationship with Iran to illustrate the nature of my inquiry. I call these versions the historical narrative and the threat narrative. The latter draws upon elements of the former, but they reveal significantly different messages. The historical narrative is essentially observational and analytical. It could be considered academic as it offers to educate listeners either for the sake of advancing knowledge, or to inform public discourse regarding policy choices. By contrast, the threat narrative is tendentious. It seeks to convince its audience of an extant danger by arousing feelings of fear and insecurity. Rather than illuminate alternatives, it advocates policy and action. The narrator's objective is to secure support for his proposals and his leadership.

The historical narrative exists in many iterations that share a basic story of a long relationship between two ethnic peoples, namely Persians and Jews. During some periods of time, each people occupied a separate geographic space; at other times they co-existed, sometimes peaceably, other times antagonistically, within the Persian

Empire and later the country of Iran. The establishment of the State of Israel ensued after a long history of interaction. The modern factual narrative is fraught with ambiguity occasioned by the complexities of the region. The establishment of a Jewish homeland surrounded by Islamic Arab nations presented a major disruption in the international order. As an Islamic country, Iran shares an identity with Israel's enemy neighbors; its people, however, are not Arab and its Shia population comprises a religious minority in a majority Sunni region. Consequently, there is space for covert collaboration, if not overt cooperation, among the two nations with "outlier" populations. Just as the historical narrative featured periods of conflict and co-existence and of tolerance and discrimination over the course of millennia, so, too, the first three decades following the establishment of the State of Israel had instances of rhetorical warfare as well as collaboration.

The historical narrative added a recent chapter with a new account of significant enmity between the two nations. Two unprecedented disruptive events comprise the bulk of the recent story. The first is the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and the second is the public disclosure of Iran's program for development of nuclear technology and capability. While it is too early to determine whether these events represent permanent directional change in the narrative arc of waxing and waning relations, rhetoric and actions by the nations' leaders have challenged the capacity of those who would offer a dispassionate historical narrative to be heard in public debates. At a minimum, these events have given rise to the threat narrative, the historical components of which obstruct the public's hearing of a neutral, fact-based analysis.

In examining the threat narrative, it is important to note that the historical narrative does not lead to the conclusion that an unprecedented hostile confrontation between Israel and Iran was inevitable. It suggests that the establishment of the

theocratic Islamic Republic initiated two changes in the relationship: it ended a formal collaborative enterprise between Israel and the Shah, and it intensified the anti-Israel rhetoric of Iran's new leaders. While Iran's actions can be interpreted as assuming the public posture of an enemy, which represents a potential threat to the security of Israel, we know that initially the enmity was not total. In an arrangement brokered by the United States, Israel secretly provided weapons to the Islamic Republic of Iran to assist it during its war against Iraq; and Iran sold oil to Israel. Given the intensification of accusatory rhetoric between the two nations, it is understandable that the initial discovery of Iran's program for developing its nuclear capability would lead some Israelis to consider whether this development represented the proverbial "tipping point." Iran's potential for acquiring a nuclear weapon not only challenged Israel's status as the sole nuclear power in the Middle East, it threatened to change the balance of power in the region. A nuclear Iran created new uncertainties that magnified the risks, actual and perceived. Uncertainty opened space for creative narrative.

In a factual account, an observer could, however, find reasons not to overstate the danger. Even without the potential for rapprochement between the two nations in the foreseeable future, Iran was entangled in the labyrinthine conflicts of the Middle East, which directed its attention to concerns other than Israel. Iran faced a regional quagmire, while all was not copacetic domestically. It had to recover from a long and costly war with Iraq. It had a young, educated, and restless population and a government split between a clerical establishment and elected politicians. It had a religious and political hardline Revolutionary Guard, which wielded power, but did not enjoy popular support. It also had more enemies than friends among the nations in its neighborhood. The hostility between Shia and Sunni Muslims was often as intense as that between Jews and Muslims. Iran's ambitions and operations, including its support

for non-state terrorist organizations that included Israel among their targets, are worthy of their own dissertation. The important point is that in Iran's power maneuverings and its threat calculations, Israel was a marginal player. Hence the Iranians fear of Israel was not symmetrical to that experienced by Israelis of Iran.

Among developments material to the factual account, one stands out as a potential disruptor of the threat narrative. When Iran declared that it was not developing nuclear weaponry,² a finding backed by United States Intelligence and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in multiple reports,³ it could have introduced skepticism into the political discourse that was increasingly vilifying Iran and ascribing evil intentions to its rulers. Instead, many professed disbelief, using Iran's protestations to argue against trusting the nation's leaders. To be sure, the forswearing of weapons acquisition did not mean that Iran had neither the capacity nor the knowledge to do so, but it did undermine claims that Iran's possession of and intention to use a bomb were imminent. A change in the Middle East power dynamic might still be coming, but it had not yet arrived, and there was no certainty that it would ever do so. Even more troubling for those unwilling to trust Iran was the country's election of a politically moderate president who wanted to engage with the West, and who expressed a willingness to relinquish Iran's capacity to produce a nuclear weapon. Such conduct, if taken at face value, did not fit the threat narrative.

² Iranian officials have repeatedly denied seeking nuclear weaponry, beginning in 1997 when President Hashemi Rafsanjani told *60 Minutes*, "Definitely not. I hate this kind of weapon." Subsequent Presidents, as well as Iranian nuclear officials, have been consistent in their denials of this intention ever since.

³ The 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) concluded that Iran had suspended its effort at achieving nuclear weapons in 2003. Similarly, a 2015 IAEA report stated that Iran's efforts at building a nuclear weapon never progressed beyond feasibility and scientific studies. These documents, as well as the response to them, are discussed in detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

Also incongruent with Iran's posture as a threat was its willingness to negotiate and its agreement to place restrictions on its nuclear development program. As Iran acted to increase the probability that it would reach an agreement, which would objectively and verifiably reduce the imminence of its acquisition of a nuclear weapon, Israel intensified the threat narrative. This was a counterintuitive development. The salience of the threat depended upon the belief that Iran not only posed a danger to Israel's security but threatened Israel's existence. Israeli politicians, facilitated by elite opinion makers and public officials, had an instrumental objective in constructing this narrative. Thus, they started with their conclusion and worked backward: The primary purpose of Iran's nuclear program was to develop a nuclear weapon that would target Israel.

While the narrative's conclusion was clear – Iran posed an existential threat to Israel – it offered alternative explanations of its nature. Thus, even if the regime did not immediately deploy its weapon against Israel, it would fundamentally interfere with Israel's ability to protect itself. In sharp contrast with the historical version, the tropes of the threat narrative appealed to emotion over reason. Nuclear annihilation is scary, and the idea of fundamentalist Islamic clerics controlling such weapons is even scarier. Working backwards, the narrators employed selective historic events as the basis for suspecting that Iran's leaders intended to use their weapon against Israel. They used, or more accurately, misused history in two ways. First, by distorting accounts of the relationship of Jews and Persians, they framed the threat as a consequence of a historic enmity. Second, by analogizing the Iranian regime to history's mass murderers of Jews, they cast themselves in a traditional role as victims, raising the specter of history repeating itself.

It is worth noting that in the threat narrative the origin of the historical enmity traces back to a historic myth canonized as a book in the Hebrew Bible. In the story, a Jewish queen, the eponymous Esther, heroically reveals her identity to her husband, the Persian King, who intervenes to prevent the carrying out of a plan to murder the Jews of the empire. As a myth, it is arguably open to further mythologizing, but there is little basis for concluding that it unequivocally validates the ancient enmity between Persians and Jews.⁴ Despite the effort to situate the threat narrative in a history of Jewish victimhood at the hands of Persians, the modern Israeli-constructed Iran threat narrative is essentially ahistorical.⁵ It is not concerned with factual accuracy or the reality of the events it invokes, but rather with the impact that the narrator's account will produce on the listener. It is crafted to create a perception of a present reality that warns of a disastrous future unless Israel takes preventative measures. It is this threat narrative and its consequences that are the focus of this study.

This project posits that the threat narrative is central to understanding the nature of the enmity of Israel toward Iran following the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Republic's restarting of its nuclear development program. As this is an academic inquiry, it employs the frame of securitization theory modified by populism – a theory I call “populist securitization” – as the basis for examining how political actors' construction of a threat narrative and dissemination of its messages to their publics

⁴ Ironically, the strongest case for this position would be to argue that it is the non-Jewish residents of the Persian Empire and not the Jews who were the ultimate victims. Since the King could not withdraw the edict he was duped into issuing by his evil vizier, identified as an Aggagite, he authorized the Jews to take up arms against their would-be annihilators. The story concludes by recounting the numbers of persons killed by the Jews. See Chapter 2 for discussion of the Purim story.

⁵ It is inconsequential that the modern States of Israel and Iran occasionally found common ground on issues pertaining both to security and to economic development. It would be inconvenient to acknowledge that Israel's assistance to the Shah included support for his secret police instrumental in maintaining his increasingly oppressive rule, which eventually contributed to the anger and resentment that led to his overthrow.

became the foundation for foreign policy and international relations. The populist securitization lens enables us to see the human influence on a polity's perception of unfolding consequential events. We see how the securitization processes embraces a threat narrative developed by political leaders based upon their personal choices of resonant tropes. It achieves traction when listeners internalize its messages and experience the emotions the narrator seeks to elicit. Populism is a strategy employed by leaders seeking to secure their power. It appeals to a collective identity that achieves cohesion and power by excluding the other, comprising those defined by difference and dissenters, whom the collective sees as opposing their positions or values.

Before discussing the methodology for this inquiry, I introduce the subject with a brief explanation of how I conceptualize the role of political narrative in public discourse. I will then review how I conducted my inquiry. I conclude this introduction by outlining the structure of the discussion in this project.

The Power of Political Narrative

All societies tell stories. Politicians⁶ invoke these stories and transform them into a narrative that they offer repeatedly as they engage in political discourse. The promotion of political narrative is frequently a competitive process in which power actors seek to influence the beliefs and conduct of targeted publics for the promotion of the narrator's self or cause, or both. A political narrative, such as that examined in this project, has two mutually reinforcing elements: a substantive message related to a policy position and a vision of the polity who should embrace it. A leader dependent

⁶ I use politician in a broad sense to encompass more than individuals seeking or holding public office. I include public figures and elite actors who influence the political process and contribute to shaping public opinion.

upon popular support for implementation of his agenda⁷ must offer a societal vision to serve as the foundation for his advocacy enterprise. The vision includes a historically-based collective biographical identity, which he expects his supportive listeners to internalize. A technique for defining this identity is to define a distinctiveness that excludes the “other,” meaning those who do not fit the definitional criteria or who challenge the narrative’s message.

The political narrative effectively creates a “communication bond” between power and public.⁸ To resonate with listeners, the narrative will reflect the fears, hopes and prejudices grounded in their cultural understandings. Particularly in a dynamic environment, to achieve traction the narrative should offer value to listeners’ lives. Most often, this takes the form of providing clarity in an environment that would otherwise be perceived as unsettlingly ambiguous or uncertain. To secure support for policy proposals, it projects certitude about the rightness of the proffered decisions, based at least in part on the moral authority inherent in its message. Both the resonance and justifications are captured in tropes selected by the narrator and affirmed by supportive elites, including public officials, opinion leaders, and the media. A key feature of the political narrative involves the position assumed by the narrator. As its constructor, she will generally portray her role as the narrative’s agent, who is prepared both to disseminate the message and to inherit the mantle of leadership.

The foreign policy narrative, particularly one addressing issues of national security, is a particular species of the political narrative. The political leader has fewer

⁷ All leaders are to a greater or lesser extent dependent upon popular support. Some leaders must find messages that resonate with potential voters, who have the freedom to choose among candidates with differing opinions. Other leaders must create an appearance of popular support or, at a minimum, avoid alienating those with the power to remove them from office.

⁸ The term is adapted from W. Lance Bennett and Murray Edelman, ‘Toward a New Political Narrative’, *Journal of Communication* 35, no. 4 (December 1985): 156–71.

constraints in crafting content due both to the government's traditional responsibility for the conduct of foreign affairs and to the public's lack of sophisticated knowledge about the foreign entity or entities. The history of the country's relationship with the other, particularly details and nuances, is also likely to be less familiar to the polity. When the other is deemed the enemy, the listening publics are generally not interested in ambiguity, but rather are looking to their governmental leaders for protection.⁹ They are seeking to make sense of developments and to receive reassurance that their leaders have a plan to address their insecurity. Ronald Krebs notes, "Debates over national security are in fact often underpinned by dominant narratives that weave present challenges, past failures and triumphs, and potential futures into a coherent tale, with well-defined characters and plot lines."¹⁰ These narrative elements need not be factually accurate; it is more important that they be emotionally resonant.

The coherency of proposal and justification offered by the leader is fostered by the tropes he chooses in crafting his narrative. He seeks not only to develop a unifying message as a response to the public's shared concerns, but also to reduce opposition from skeptics or opponents. The appeal to emotion rather than fact facilitates this effort. A resonant narrative that appeals to feelings, particularly those of fear and insecurity, can effectively obstruct critical inquiry. A narrative embodying an impression of reality based upon ideological and cultural understandings disguised as truth will inhibit verification efforts. We see this process of development at work in this project's examination of the threat narrative constructed by Israeli officials, notably Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, about the danger posed by Iran.

⁹ Ole R. Holsti, 'Cognitive Dynamics and Images of the Enemy', *Journal of International Affairs* 21, no. 1 (1 January 1967): 39.

¹⁰ Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

The story of Israel's interaction with Iran constructed by Israeli leaders, and reinforced by the country's elites, positioned Iran as an enemy deserving of an active response. The justification for extraordinary proposals, including military action, invoked historical and identity tropes that sought to elicit feelings of fear and insecurity while promoting a societal unity of determination to confront the risk. During the time period covered by this project, the enmity played out almost entirely in rhetorical warfare, which makes the narrative the critical element in understanding the conflict. The narrative used history in three ways. First, it situated the conflict as a continuation of a long-standing enmity between Persians and Jews. Second, it claimed that Iran's rulers were the successors to the twentieth century's Nazi regime that sought to systematically eradicate all Jews and succeeded in killing six million of them. Third, it promoted an identity of Jews as perennial victims for whom Israel is both the heir of the Zionist vision of Jewish homeland and the manifestation of the Jewish resolve of "never again." This included a moral obligation to act preemptively against would-be destroyers.

The narrative served both as a central feature of Israel's foreign policy and as a basis for seeking international support. Through its recounting in international forums, we see how Israel sought to recast itself from an occupying force that oppresses the Palestinians to a victim of Iran's intended annihilation of its state. Fealty to the narrative led Israel to challenge would be allies when they embraced diplomacy as a means to reduce the risk posed by a nuclear-armed Iran. Israel thus separated itself from its Western allies. Having portrayed Iran's rulers as untrustworthy and ascribed to them murderous intention, Israel's leaders would not accept a compromise that would materially modify the narrative. Since politicians are generally not known for religiously committing to policy consistency, the decisions of Israeli leaders raise questions about the intentions of the Israeli narrator.

While the psychology of leadership is beyond the scope of this project, analysis of the narrative tropes shows how it advanced the case for the narrator's agency. In particular, Netanyahu positioned himself as the leader most able to confront the enemy and to challenge dissenters. Words were both his tools and weapons, pending an opportunity to take active measures against the enemy. He offered his narrative as more than a contribution to political debate, but as part of a rhetorical war against both Iran and his political opponents. The words threatened consequences, one of which was the danger that the message would become self-fulfilling to the detriment of his nation or international stability.

Methodology

This project's focus on narrative necessarily requires examining both the available source material that comprises Israel's political discourse and the events that impact the political environment. I present my analysis through a theoretical lens that I derived through engagement with the relevant scholarly literature. I developed a historical context from accounts in primary materials and the secondary literature.

Since I am concerned primarily with public narrative offered in political discourse, my primary sources are the words of the politicians and public officials, as well as contemporary analysis of materials that contributed meaning to and enhanced public understanding. To that end, I examined multiple sources to piece together the public rhetoric. These included texts of speeches, newspaper accounts, and minutes of legislative and cabinet debates. I also interviewed journalists, academics, and authors willing to discuss their contribution to or understanding of the political discourse concerning historical and contemporary events involving Iran policy.¹¹ Finally, I

¹¹ Unfortunately, many current or former government officials were unwilling to speak on the record about Iranian issues.

examined cultural and influential materials, including editorials, books, and academic reports.

This project focuses on the Israeli perspective of the threat posed by Iran for reasons both substantive and practical. On a substantive level, my initial research and my review of the Persian language Iranian press available on line revealed that Israeli leaders devoted considerably more attention to Iran as a threat to their nation than Iranian leaders voiced concern about Israel's threat to their nation's security. Moreover, the relative threat perception of each state's political establishment was asymmetrical. Israel painted Iran as an existential threat, while, to the extent that Iranian leaders feared an Israeli attack, they suspected it would target Iran's nuclear facilities. Thus, my focus on Iranian rhetoric, for the most part, sought to filter it through the Israeli perspective by examining what Israelis and their allies were hearing. The practical reason is that I could not gain access as a researcher to Iran.¹² Although I was able to spend a few weeks as a tourist visiting the country during this project, I was unable to conduct significant research or interviews. My observations of life in the areas I visited, as well as my monitoring of the Persian media, did not match the impressions conveyed in the rhetorical pictures of Iranian society offered by Israeli officials.

The manageability of the project within the time constraints for its conduct also required decisions about language. Since Israeli leaders directed their rhetoric at

¹² At the outset of this project in 2014, I had hoped that improving relations between Iran and the United States might enable me to travel to Iran to conduct fieldwork. After efforts to obtain a visa for language study proved unsuccessful, I received advice that it would not be safe for an American citizen to visit as a researcher. As mentioned earlier, this was not a disqualifying development. My research has already revealed the inaccuracy of my initial hypothesis of a conflict fueled by mutually escalating rhetoric based upon the leaders of each nation considering the other as an outside security risk. Field inquiry into the Iranian perspective was therefore not essential to this project. I nevertheless found my visit to Iran invaluable as it gave me firsthand observational experience of Iran typically lacking in analysis of that country.

multiple domestic publics as well as international audiences, I necessarily reviewed speeches which were delivered in both Hebrew and English. For my review of opinion material and Israeli reporting, I focused primarily on Israel's English-language press.¹³ This enabled me to review and analyze more material, including allowing me to employ novel techniques for analysis, such as corpus tracking using computer programming software for textual analysis.¹⁴

My research also revealed that that Israeli politicians delivered some of the most salient descriptions of Iran as a threat during addresses to English-speaking audiences. This finding highlighted the important contributions to this project of English language accounts by Israeli leaders and media reports. Highlighting Israel's security vulnerability particularly resonated with those who identified with Israel and the political Zionist idea but did not live there.¹⁵ Such listeners were important figures in policy advocacy, since they usually included organized political constituencies and wealthy individuals, who participated in the political debates over Israel in their home countries.¹⁶ In addition,

¹³ When relying upon reportorial accounts, I frequently cross-checked English accounts with those in the Hebrew language press to ensure there were no material factual differences.

¹⁴ While still in the nascent stages of development as a tool for social science researchers, these techniques allow researchers to analyze massive amounts of materials simultaneously. By treating text as a singular dataset, researchers can identify themes and observe trends that would otherwise be difficult to spot through traditional methods of discourse analysis. For the analysis in this project, I relied primarily on the R coding program and the method developed by Matthew Jockers in *Text Analysis with R for Students of Literature*. Matthew L. Jockers, *Text Analysis with R for Students of Literature*, 2014 edition (New York: Springer, 2014).

¹⁵ Political Zionism refers to the modern vision of the State of Israel as the embodiment of the biblical promise of a Jewish homeland. This motivational philosophy provides an instrumental justification underpinning support for a political entity in the contemporary world. It is not, as is sometimes mistakenly assumed, based on the historical atrocities committed against the Jewish people in the diaspora, including pogroms and the Holocaust. By contrast, biblical Zionism is an idea associated with a vision of the land and people of Israel to be realized at some future messianic time.

¹⁶ Many of these individuals followed developments in Israel as regular readers of Israel's English-language newspapers.

Israeli leaders generally used English when publicly voicing direct appeals to world leaders for support of measures to address the Iran threat. At the same time, speeches to international audiences frequently filtered back to domestic audiences through coverage in the Hebrew press. The reporting often amplified the message or enhanced its importance based upon the forum in which it was delivered. It is also significant that the largest English language newspaper published in Israel is generally supportive of the hawkish position on Iran, which, as this project shows, has become the dominant threat narrative advanced by government officials.¹⁷

A limiting factor in conducting background and contextual research is the unavailability of classified materials on recent events. Most of the internal documentation about Israel's strategic security debates over Iran is classified, and thus impossible to obtain through ordinary research channels.¹⁸ I reviewed declassified older state records, which allowed for a more complete understanding of the early years of the Iran-Israel relationship. The contemporaneous accounts in those documents were

¹⁷ The preference for English in this inquiry does not compromise the integrity of my conclusion. This project posits that the most consequential audience for the salience of the threat narrative are the domestic elite publics and potential international allies, both government leaders and world Jewry in the form of organizations and wealthy donors. Elite Israelis often participate in both the domestic and international debates, and hence speak and understand English. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, for example, surrounds himself with English-speaking advisors and often conducts cabinet meetings in English rather than Hebrew. In addition, a significant politically active constituency for the narrative's message are the immigrants, who are primarily politically conservative on issues of Israeli security. Immigrants from Europe and the Americas are approximately a third of the Israeli population. For many, English remains the universal language of cross-cultural discourse. The largest immigrant bloc is from Russia, who, while maintaining their own linguistic community, are apt to know English even if they also study Hebrew. Israel's education curriculum requires the study of English, ensuring that educated Israelis understand the language, especially if they follow international affairs.

¹⁸ There are, for example, no listed records for documents pertaining to Iranian-Israeli relations in the Israeli State Archives after 1987.

particularly helpful in piecing together the history of the relationship between Iran and the new Israeli State discussed in chapter two.

I also had access to unclassified archival material recording officials' discussions concerning relatively recent Iranian policy matters. In particular, I reviewed contemporaneous materials from Israel State Archives, the Prime Minister's Office, and the Israeli Foreign Ministry document collections. Additionally, I visited the Israeli Knesset Archives to obtain transcripts of parliamentary debates that discussed Iran. This provided useful insights into how members of different parties viewed the urgency of the Iranian threat across the country's diverse political spectrum.

My approach to using this material, which is reflected in the organization of this manuscript discussed in the following section, was to create a timeline of interactions between Israel and Iran, including rhetorical exchanges, and then to review the various accounts and debates among Israelis as well as messages addressed to the international community. The absence of a searchable data base for Israeli media outlets complicated my comprehensive review of all Iran stories. While I sought information from a variety of sources from across the broad media landscape, I chose to focus on the *Jerusalem Post* for this timeline construction. This newspaper provided several advantages from a research perspective. It is among the oldest media outlets in the country – dating back to the pre-statehood era when it was known as the *Palestine Post* – and has been continuously published throughout the history of the Iranian-Israeli conflict. It is also one of the only Israeli newspapers with searchable chronological archives. As a relatively conservative paper, it proved a useful tool for gauging the perspective of the Israeli right-wing, which encompasses the political parties most concerned with the Iran threat. The newspaper chronicled the pronouncements and positions of this faction's political leaders even when they were not part of a ruling government coalition. As opposition

leader, Benjamin Netanyahu regularly contributed to its op-ed pages. This source enabled me to use both daily coverage and op-ed reviews to generate a single, continuous timeline of one media outlet's Iran coverage beginning in 1989 and running through 2015.

I layered on top of this search other sources of information, including expert analyses from Israeli think tanks; speeches and transcripts from the Prime Minister's office; and relevant coverage from other media sources across the ideological spectrum. I also added key dates and events relevant to the conflict, such as national elections, dates of international negotiations, and regional armed conflicts. Finally, I included selective media reports and statements on Israel from Iranian sources. Taken as a whole, this timeline made it possible to track the rhetorical shifts in the narrative in response to major events.

Project Organization Overview

I present my findings and analysis in five chapters and an epilogue. I begin with a discussion of the theoretical foundation for my inquiry. In chapter one I trace how the predominant theories, namely realism and constructivism, offer incomplete analyses of international relations. This led theorists associated with the Copenhagen School to develop a theory called securitization for identifying and analyzing how nations perceive and respond to threats – and for examining the effect this has on their political behavior. In the final section of the chapter, I offer an amendment to securitization theory based upon the challenges associated with universalizing application of the theory. I argue that it is incomplete as it fails to account for human agency in both the construction of the threat and its dissemination and resonance. I therefore suggest a new understanding that I call populist securitization, which I argue provides a lens for this project. In particular, I submit that securitization is useful for examining the

construction of the threat narrative, while populism supplies the strategic guidance for the securitizing agent in choosing his tropes to achieve his intended ends.

In chapter two, I present my study of a historical narrative detailing the relationship between Iran and Israel up until the 1979 Islamic Revolution. I offer a brief look at the political interactions between Jews and Persians and a more detailed examination of the relationship between Iran and the nascent state of Israel. This political history provides a basis for analyzing the historical justifications offered by each country's modern leaders for their policy decisions related to the other's state. It highlights how history is used, or in this case misused, in development of the threat narrative. The historical narrative contrasts with what is remembered and overlooked when characterizing the past relations between the two peoples and countries. This chapter concludes with a factual account of the deterioration of an alliance between the Shah and Israeli leaders and the events leading to the development of the enmity occasioned by the Islamic Revolution. The post-Revolution modern history is interwoven with my discussion of the development of the threat narrative in subsequent chapters.

Chapters three through five examine the construction and dissemination of the threat narrative. Chapters three and four follow the development chronologically, while chapter five uses a thematic approach in identifying the narrative tropes refined and articulated by Prime Minister Netanyahu during his second term of leadership.¹⁹ Chapter three examines the initiation of the securitization process, by which I mean that Israel's leaders recast Iran from a peripheral political issue to a dangerous security threat. I look

¹⁹ Netanyahu has served two discontinuous periods as Prime Minister: from 1996-1999 and again since 2009. His two periods of service are not two four-year electoral terms. In the first period he was defeated for reelection after the calling of new elections under Israel's parliamentary system. The second period has involved more than one electoral term. I shall nevertheless refer to Netanyahu's resumption of office beginning in 2009 as his second term.

at the events and political developments that influenced how top Israeli officials described Iran. In so doing, they crafted a narrative that sought to warn Israelis and the world of the dangers that Iran posed to Israel. During much of this period, the public discourse on Iran took place in discussions limited to elites. When compared with the threats of imminent but uncertain disruptions of daily life, the public appeared less interested in debating whether and how to address a more abstract threat from Iran.

Chapter four looks at the two seminal events that changed the Israeli public's perception of Iran resulting in the acceptance of Iran as an existential threat: first, the surprise election to the Iranian presidency in 2005 of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a hardline politician with a penchant for making outrageous and anti-Semitic statements; and second, the Second Lebanon War in 2006. These events reframed Israeli's sense of insecurity. I show how Israeli officials took some creative license in justifying their military's failure to end the terrorist threat of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. Casting Iran as the real enemy and professing that Ahmadinejad was about to acquire a nuclear weapon concretized and intensified the threat. The feeling of insecurity aroused by the reinforced narrative, together with domestic political developments, paved the way for the return of Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister.

For Netanyahu, Iran had always represented a significant security threat. Moreover, he had long articulated a belief that its building of a nuclear capability would create an existential danger. Thus, he advocated for extraordinary response measures to eliminate the threat. As prime minister he assumed the authorship of a narrative that would justify his crusade. Analysis of his rhetoric and actions reveals a two-pronged approach: refining the narrative to maximize the public's sense of insecurity and securing his place as leader of the response both domestically and internationally. Chapter 5 examines Netanyahu's strategic choices of rhetorical tropes, which reflect his

goal of achieving full securitization of Iran as an existential threat while advancing a populist appeal to secure his leadership.²⁰

I end with an epilogue that notes the developments following the conclusion of my period of study. It summarizes the durability and resonance of the narrative, and it explores its impact on decisions in the international community concerning whether to abandon the international agreement suspending Iran's nuclear development program. This discussion arbitrarily concludes as of May 8, 2018, the day on which United States President Donald Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, aka the Iran Nuclear Deal), an objective long-sought by Netanyahu in promoting his threat narrative.²¹ Ironically, while the threat narrative appears fixed, the conclusion of the historical narrative is unknown.

²⁰ Examining Netanyahu's selection of narrative tropes reveals that Netanyahu's strategy is more reflective of populism than nationalism. In particular, his emphases on relative morality, twisting of the historical narrative, disregard of contradictory evidence, and rejection of diplomacy secured his foreign policy leadership but have not insulated him from challenge and criticism in other areas of his leadership. Additionally, he has positioned himself in the Iran debate as the representative of global Jewry, going beyond Israel's national citizenry and sovereignty. The definitional distinction between populism and nationalism, however, is not material to this project.

²¹ The necessity for concluding the project is compelled by the need to submit the dissertation in satisfaction of the requirements of the doctoral program.

Chapter One: Theoretical Foundation

I. Introduction

What is a threat? What is security? These apparently simple concepts are heavily contested. The concept of existential threat and the idea that it may be constructed by a human agent, rather than objectively real, is the basis for application of securitization theory to this project. While it is unnecessary to evaluate how far to expand the concept of threat and the scenario in which it arises, the threat at issue in this study attenuates the original concept of looming imminent military engagement. To be sure, Iran's potential acquisition of nuclear weaponry arguably poses an existential risk to a nation that may be a target of its deployment. Consequently, Israel's proposed response could include military action, possibly preemptively undertaken. I submit, however, that although this is not the only, or even an accurate, assessment of the conflict, securitization remains a useful analytical frame.²²

While securitization theory guides us in examining a leader's motivation for identifying a threat as existential and to which he will lead a response, it falls short in formalizing the role of situational context. Particularly in settings where the existence and the assessment of the threat are disputed, it does not offer generalization of the conditions under which he is likely to secure public support for his initiative.

Securitization nevertheless enables us to begin our inquiry of how and why Israelis came to consider Iran an existential threat by examining the development by Israel's leaders of a threat narrative that sought to make Israelis feel insecure. This

²² As with any theoretical analysis of international relations, I am not suggesting that the actors are consciously modeling their behavior to conform to the theory's elements, but rather that securitization provides a construct for deconstructing and analyzing the human behavior and rhetoric associated with the creation of and reaction to an existential threat.

requires that we consider both the actor's motives for his choice of themes and the discursive techniques he employs in appealing to his listeners' emotions. This project highlights that, while the public must perceive that the danger exists, neither the threat itself nor its characteristics needs to be objectively verifiable. The narrative may suggest that the leader chose his content to inhibit verification, by either appealing to emotions that diminish concern for veracity or masking personal opinion as fact.

The theoretical lens for this project has two parts. The first, as mentioned above, involves the development process of the threat narrative for achieving securitization. In addition to the narrative content, we seek to understand the exogenous events and the environmental context as well as the actor's inherent characteristics that influenced his choice of tropes. Second, we look at the contribution of other participants in the securitization process, the enablers, who, by their particular promotion of the threat narrative advocated certain responses above alternative options.

I suggest that the inquiry is incomplete, however, if we do not also understand the reaction of the polity, especially how and why a sizable portion of Israelis internalized the threat and supported the leader who was offering to protect them. I thus argue that this inquiry is enhanced by the addition of populist strategies to the application of securitization theory. What I call "populist securitization" offers a theoretical lens for achieving a more complete understanding of the motivations and expectations of the leaders, elite participants, and the collective audiences who developed, promoted, and accepted the threat narrative. While I seek to tease out the generally applicable elements of the theoretical populist securitization model, it is beyond the scope of this project to apply it further.

Before explaining the applicability of the theory, I begin by discussing the limits of the more traditional international relations theories of realism and constructivism to

this inquiry. I then examine the importance of emotions in our understanding of leaders' motives and listeners' expectations, which are effectively overlooked in the traditional theories. This provides the foundation for discussing the applicability of securitization theory and how its modification by populism produces a more complete analysis of how Israelis came to regard Iran as an existential threat and the consequences of doing so.

II. The Limits of Traditional International Relations Theorizing

A. Realism: Too Narrow

A study of the way Israeli leaders think about and respond to threats, particularly those posed by Iran and its nuclear program, requires understanding of the ways in which Israelis think about themselves. Realism suggests the logical place to begin this analysis because it is the rhetoric Israeli leaders use to justify their policies and actions.

As Marc Lynch has noted, Israel inhabits a region that is “one of the most realist parts of the world, with a high risk of war, deep mistrust, and fierce competitiveness.”²³

Although Israeli leaders have frequently invoked realist logic to highlight the threats they face and to justify their response, it is inadequate for understanding the dynamic confrontation between Israel and Iran.²⁴ Why has Israel, a country possessing nuclear

²³ Marc Lynch, ‘International Relations’, in *The Middle East*, ed. Ellen Lust (CQ Press, 2016), 373.

²⁴ Realism as a modern international relations theory developed in the aftermath of the Second World War with the work of scholars such as Hans Morgenthau. In seeking to explain the devastation and destruction wrought by the two World Wars of the first half of the twentieth century, Morgenthau laid out six principles of political realism: 1) politics are governed by objective laws that have their roots in human nature; 2) interest in international politics is defined in terms of power; 3) power is “universally valid,” but its meaning can vary; 4) morality plays a role in political action, but its significance must be “filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place”; 5) morality of states is not the same as universal moral truth; and, finally, 6) the political sphere is autonomous from other schools of thought. Hans J. Morgenthau, Kenneth W. Thompson, and David Clinton, *Politics Among Nations*, 7 edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill Education, 2005), 4–15.

weapons, built a foreign policy upon casting Iran, a nation that may or may not acquire such a weapon, as an existential threat?

The political realist asks only a single question in assessing the development of foreign policy. That question – how does this policy affect the power of the nation? – can only provide a starting point rather than a determinative understanding of the behavior of states and their leaders. The simplicity is understandable given the pedigree of a theory with roots in texts by thinkers such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hobbes. For example, modern scholars see a comparison between the state’s constant quest for power and the contest for survival described in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*. Hobbes famously characterized life in the state of nature as “nasty, brutish, and short,” owing to mankind’s overarching desire to survive above all other concerns, even at the expense of others.²⁵ Similarly, realists describe a world experiencing endless violent contests, one in which possession and deployment of power is the only thing that matters in international relations.²⁶ The embrace of power politics analysis is seductive to policy makers seeking simple solutions to complex problems. They need not spend much time understanding the factors that differentiate nations and shape foreign policy interests.²⁷ This is dangerous for accurate analysis of actions by Middle East actors, since the preoccupation with and compartmentalization of power discounts the mélange of religious identities, ethnic hatreds, and domestic political rivalries, which make certain international conflicts so intractable.

²⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (First Avenue Editions, 2018), i. xiii. 9.

²⁶ As Thucydides puts it in the Melian Dialogue, “The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Sir R. W. Livingstone, trans. R. Crawley, First Edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1943).

²⁷ Although, as Legro and Moravcsik have noted, some modern realists have been forced to incorporate these factors, but without attempting to reconcile the contradictions they create in traditional realist theory. Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, ‘Is Anybody Still a Realist?’, *International Security* 24, no. 2 (October 1999): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228899560130>.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War provides a useful case study for illustrating the limitations of realist analysis in the Middle East. Following the surprise attack by the Egyptian and Syrian armies against Israel on Yom Kippur 1973, the Nixon administration, guided by one of the most prominent and influential practitioners of modern realism, Henry Kissinger, concluded that it would be unacceptable to have the Soviet-supplied Arab weapons be seen defeating the American-supplied Israeli ones.²⁸ Even the suggestion that Soviet-produced tanks, aircraft, and artillery could best a U.S.-supplied army would damage the power of the United States in its global confrontation with Communism. President Nixon thus authorized a massive military resupply package to the Israelis, who were subsequently able to halt Arab advancement and even regain much of the territory they had lost.²⁹

As my research in this thesis will demonstrate, Israeli leaders' focus on Iran, although occasionally justified in the language of realist concerns, in fact accorded lower status to realist concerns with relative power both in foreign policy making and, eventually, in political discourse. An examination of the Israeli construction of a narrative surrounding Iran, therefore, cannot be explained solely by realist-inspired practice.

During the Cold War, the most important variable had been the perception of relative power between forces of the East and those of the West. Policymakers did not consider cultural and historical memory, nor did they factor in the potential consequences of their decisions on societal perceptions. Significantly, this was not a realistic version of events on the ground, and the failure to account for these concerns

²⁸ 'Secretary's Staff Meeting', 23 October 1973, Box 1, Transcripts of Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger Staff Meetings, 1973-1977, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB98/octwar-63.pdf>.

²⁹ Zach Levey, 'Anatomy of an Airlift: United States Military Assistance to Israel during the 1973 War', *Cold War History* 8, no. 4 (2008): 481.

often resulted in unanticipated consequences. For example, to those who fought in the conflict, the realism of the Nixon administration bore little resemblance to the world they experienced. For the Arab armies, 1973 was an attempt to correct the humiliations of 1948 and 1967, when Arab coalitions were soundly defeated by the fledgling Israeli military.³⁰ For the Israelis, the attack provided further evidence that the Arabs would never accept their presence in the region.³¹ Israelis saw their survival as dependent upon their own strength and military self-sufficiency, notwithstanding the massive American military resupply. They did not see a role for the numerous layers of conflict subtext, including culture, ethnicity, and religion which, at a minimum created different perceptions of the reasons for their conflict.³² Realism thus presents a conundrum. On one hand, it is far too simple to provide a satisfactory predictive model or explanation of consequences since it ignores too many variables that impact decision making. At the same time, it still attracts practitioners who insist that consideration of national power is a sufficient basis for making or understanding foreign policy decisions. Particularly with the end of the Cold War and the subsequent fractionalization of global power in the Middle East, we need something more for analyzing the complex relationships between states in the region.

B. Constructivism: Too Broad

Constructivism emerged as a theory in response to the failures of realism to anticipate and explain the collapse of the Soviet Union. In contrast to realism, it

³⁰ Simcha Diniz, 'The Yom Kippur War: Diplomacy of War and Peace', *Israel Affairs* 6, no. 1 (1 September 1999): 106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537129908719548>.

³¹ Hagai Tsoref, 'Golda Meir's Leadership in the Yom Kippur War', *Israel Studies* 23, no. 1 (2018): 54, <https://doi.org/10.2979/israelstudies.23.1.03>.

³² Over time, American assistance to Israel in 1973 has been reinterpreted as a data point in the longstanding alliance between the two nations. Under this interpretation, the resupply decision was obvious due to the longtime alliance between the two nations and their shared values.

embraced the study of the human in seeking to understand the relationship of states.³³ Constructivists view states as led by governments comprised of people, who are subject to the psychological factors that govern human interactions, including sets of thoughts, norms, and experiences, and the accompanying psychological baggage.³⁴ According to constructivists, states' interactions are the product of human decision-making that must account for the characteristics of the decision-maker and the collective that gives the state its identity.³⁵

The term constructivism was coined in 1989 by Nicholas Onuf to describe the ways in which “people *and* societies construct, or constitute, each other.”³⁶ In his seminal book *World of Our Making*, he argues that *social* realities are as vital to our understanding of the world, if not more so, than our physical reality.³⁷ To emphasize the contrast with realism, Onuf labels himself an “irrealist”³⁸ as he articulates rules for both micro and macro-level understanding of the connection between social construction and material considerations in world politics.

³³ For nearly half a century, Realists theorized how the Cold War could turn hot and spark a military showdown that would determine the fate of the global political order. Not only did this not happen, but one of the major super powers collapsed primarily due to intra-state factors. This upset many foundational assumptions about the primacy of states and the dominance of power politics as an explanation of the relations between nations, leading scholars to examine the shortcomings in their theories for explaining events. Their approach included new thinking about the nature of the international system and its participants. Alexander Bukh, *Japan's National Identity and Foreign Policy: Russia as Japan's 'Other'* (Routledge, 2010), 2.

³⁴ Fred Halliday, *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 32.

³⁵ Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1 April 1992): 393.

³⁶ Nicholas Greenwood Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (Routledge, 2012), 36.

³⁷ Onuf invokes a variety of philosophers, especially crediting Nicholas Goodman, whom he calls “a constructivist to the furthest degree.” Onuf, 37.

³⁸ Onuf, 37.

Constructivism gained additional traction and broader acceptance as a theory of international relations in 1992 with the publication of Alexander Wendt's critique of realism in an article entitled "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics." Wendt challenges the primacy of focus on the actions of the "self-interested state" driven by exogenous considerations because it omits examination of the state's internal processes of identity and interest formation as motivators of foreign policy decisions.³⁹ He challenges the realists' analogy to the state of nature by noting that they are unable to account for why some states engage in conflict while others do not.⁴⁰ By offering a drastic reinterpretation of the underlying assumptions of the international system, Wendt opened a space for many new analyses and interpretations of the history of nations' relations.

Refocusing analysis from observable patterns of behavior to interests and identities required considerably more effort by a researcher. An inquiry could go in multiple directions, pursuing historical detail, psychological and sociological influences, and examining idiosyncratic nuances in order to produce a more complete and insightful picture of a nation and its decisions in the international system. One challenge associated with this approach, however, was the exponential increase in the number of variables in play. David Rousseau referred to this as "the constructivist challenge," meaning that the development of models for social interaction can be based on very different assumptions and result in "wildly different predictions."⁴¹

³⁹ Wendt rejects the realists' reliance upon Hobbes and the state of nature. He suggests that their perception of a "self-help world" is more likely due to developmental processes than to the overall structure of the system. Self-help and power politics are institutions, not essential features of anarchy. Wendt, 'Anarchy Is What States Make of It', 392–94.

⁴⁰ Wendt, 394–95.

⁴¹ David L. Rousseau, *Identifying Threats and Threatening Identities: The Social Construction of Realism and Liberalism* (Stanford University Press, 2006), 39. Fierke and Jorgensen, similarly, note the "long and winding" path between constructivism as a

Whereas the weakness of realist theory overlooked the humanness of actors in evaluating the conduct of nations, constructivism rested upon understanding the decisions of the human actors in inter-nation relations. If the realists' analysis of nation behavior was underinclusive, constructivists' examination of motivation risked overinclusion and misdirection. Both theories had difficulty isolating the role of emotion, perception, and motivation of the actors responsible for nations' policies. The next section discusses the materiality of these factors in foreign policy analysis.

C. The Missing Role of Perception, Emotion, and Motivation

World leaders and shapers of foreign policies usually present their decisions as based upon calculations of "facts," including prioritization of national interests, and, often, analyses of outcomes.⁴² Similarly, analysts presume that most leaders base their conclusions on objective reasoning. Yet the choice of what to designate as fact, the interpretation accorded those facts, and the processes for reaching a conclusion are products of complex and opaque psychological processes.⁴³ Political actors harbor motives for advancing proposals in public discourse, as do the people they seek to convince to support their cause. All use some calculus for measuring the potential impact of the proposed policy, but they are also influenced by often unacknowledged emotional concerns. Most scholars who advance theories of international relations overlook the impact of emotional influence on decision-making. Almost no literature

philosophical endeavor and constructivism as an empirical research tool. Karin M. Fierke and Knud Erik Jorgensen, *Constructing International Relations: The Next Generation* (Routledge, 2015), 39.

⁴² This will obviously change depending on the leader and system of government involved. An absolute dictator's policy priority might reflect the regime's, or even their personal survival at the expense of the population, while a democratic leader might seek more nation-based goals. This distinction will matter more when I discuss the concept of securitized populism later in this chapter.

⁴³ Jonathan Mercer, 'Emotional Beliefs', *International Organization* 64, no. 1 (2010): 2.

exists on the role of emotionally-grounded beliefs in political science, and little exists in political psychology.⁴⁴

Admittedly, a definition of emotion as a variable among other influential factors is difficult to isolate. It is a complex and malleable concept, which is hard to generalize. Yet realists, who look at outcomes and analyze the power relationships that led to the results, provide only a partial understanding of a conflict. Simplification creates a distorted perception of reality. As one scholar explains, if power distribution is the only meaningful variable, then the danger of realist thinking is summed up by the adage “when holding a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.”⁴⁵

Realists presume that all actors are rational, ignoring that these actors’ decisions may be motivated by any number of human characteristics, such as bias, revenge, or even altruism.⁴⁶ History is littered with examples of poorly conceived military adventurism premised on faulty assumptions, bigotry, or overly idealistic moral standards.⁴⁷ As E.H. Carr recognized in his post-World War II analysis of the Soviet Union, realism that ignores human concepts such as morality is fundamentally “unreal.”⁴⁸ States do not suddenly become technocratic automatons independent of norms developed in human societal interaction just because they are operating on an

⁴⁴ Mercer, 2.

⁴⁵ W. M. Wagner, R. Baumann, and V. Rittberger, ‘Neorealist Foreign Policy Theory’, *German Foreign Policy Since Unification. Theories and Case Studies*, 2001, 151.

⁴⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Updated edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), 301; Robert Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and Its Critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 164.

⁴⁷ Both Alistaire Horne and Peter Beinart have written recent accounts of some of these misadventures, focusing in particular on the 20th century. There are numerous examples of racially motivated conflicts by colonizer toward the colonized. Alistair Horne, *Hubris: The Tragedy of War in the Twentieth Century*, Reprint edition (Harper, 2015); Peter Beinart, *The Icarus Syndrome: A History of American Hubris*, Reprint edition (HarperCollins e-books, 2010).

⁴⁸ Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, 1946, 235.

international rather than domestic level. Any assessments of global interactions will be incomplete if premised on the assumption that humanity stops at the border. This results in a theoretical model that analyzes the decisions of states in the international arena which does not account for the factors that influence the decision-making process.⁴⁹

Constructivists build their theory upon the idea that humans make up states, and the leaders of these states bring their humanity to decision making. The challenge in acknowledging that emotions matter is how to assess their impact among the many other influences. In seeking to provide an overarching theory for the understanding of international relations, accepting a role for idiosyncratic emotions complicates the discussion. Cognition, as Jonathan Mercer points out, cannot be considered autonomously.⁵⁰ How to measure the effect of emotion on cognition is particularly difficult. It is the interaction of cognition and emotion that form beliefs,⁵¹ which in turn instruct action. “Emotional beliefs,” according to Mercer, such as trust, nationalism, sense of justice, and credibility are defining elements of state and societal identity.

The challenge for theorists rests in acknowledging that, while some beliefs may be based on a careful consideration of facts, they may also be founded upon feelings. Feelings may influence the creation or acceptance of fact. Humans interpret reality in significantly different ways, often seeing reality as they want it to be rather than as an objective observer may see it. Hence, we need to understand motivation. Further, we

⁴⁹ Colin Elman, ‘Horses for Courses: Why Not Neorealist Theories of Foreign Policy?’, *Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (Fall 1996): 12–13.

⁵⁰ Mercer, ‘Emotional Beliefs’, 2.

⁵¹ K Fiedler and H Bless, ‘The Formation of Beliefs in the Interface of Affective and Cognitive Processes’, *The Influence of Emotions on Beliefs*, 1 January 2000, 144–70.

may also need to consider whether the decision maker is aware of the feelings that are biasing his identification of facts.⁵²

Failure to recognize the difference between the belief that something is true and a verifiable fact can confound our analysis of international relations if we are unwilling or unable to discern the motivation that lay behind an actor's decision. To be sure, it is not always apparent in "real time" that the decision-making process has involved fabricated fact masquerading as the calculus for the chosen action.⁵³ This occurs most frequently when the actor prefers an outcome for which he seeks a justification. The comedian Stephen Colbert coined the term "truthiness" to describe politicians who assert as fact something they feel to be true whether or not there is evidence to support its veracity.⁵⁴ Examples abound, ranging from officials who confess the absence of evidence for their beliefs to those who admit that they intuitively feel something is true. For example, Richard Armitage, Deputy Secretary of State during the George W. Bush administration, asserted publicly and without evidence that Iran was maintaining a

⁵² My decision to concentrate on populist securitization as the theoretical frame of this project does not mean that realist considerations do not figure into the decisions of world leaders. In the study that follows, I examine the rhetoric and actions of humans as revelatory of leaders' motivations rather than ascribing these same motivations directly to states themselves. This allows for a more thorough accounting of the foreign policy decision making process, one which does not take realist rhetoric simply at face value. Examining the posturing of states vis-à-vis one another and their broader geopolitical strategic objectives is beyond the scope of this study.

⁵³ The speed of information has increased this scourge. The rapidity with which people are able to respond to events means it is not always entirely clear on what basis people are acting or reacting, and they may be motivated by completely false stories, so-called "fake news," that have gained traction prior the establishment of a factual accounting.

⁵⁴ Stephen Colbert, in the first episode of his show, "The Colbert Report," coined the term "Truthiness" to refer to ideas which feel truer than actual facts. Portraying himself as a parody of a conservative political talk show host, Colbert declared, "I don't trust books. They're all fact, no heart." Stephen Colbert, 'The Word - Truthiness', *The Colbert Report* (Comedy Central, 17 October 2005), <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/24039/october-17-2005/the-word---truthiness>.

secret nuclear weapons program, declaring, “I believe it, but I don’t know it.”⁵⁵ This and other emotionally-based presumptions proved consequential for American foreign policy. Similarly, President George W. Bush explained that his determination to engage with Russian President Vladimir Putin had been justified by their first interaction: “I looked the man in the eye,” he said, “I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy...I was able to get a sense of his soul; a man deeply committed to his country and the best interests of his country.”⁵⁶

It is most challenging to analyze situations in which actors mistakenly insist that their beliefs and conclusions are based upon facts. Often guided by what psychologists call confirmation bias, a decision maker with a strong desire to view a situation in a particular way rationalizes that his characterization of the situation is, in fact, real. The combination of emotion and impression fosters a situation in which decision makers, when confronted with conflicting information or views, rationalize that what they are hearing is either incorrect or immaterial to the policy proposal.

It is also possible for a leader to deliberately fabricate facts to justify a course of action he believes to be in his own or his nation’s best interests. This occurs most often under conditions of uncertainty where it is difficult to determine the veracity of the claim. The actor’s motivation may only be recognizable in hindsight, when it is too late to undo the consequences.⁵⁷ Capturing this behavior in a generalizable theory is a

⁵⁵ Seymour M. Hersh, ‘The Iran Plans’, *The New Yorker*, 10 April 2006, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/04/17/the-iran-plans>.)

⁵⁶ Caroline Wyatt, ‘Bush and Putin: Best of Friends’, *BBC News*, 16 June 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/1392791.stm>.

⁵⁷ A particular danger associated with overlooking emotion in foreign policy scholarship is that it leads to an incomplete understanding of the moral and ethical values that merit consideration in making or assessing decisions. Emotion necessarily influences the formation of such values, which are often the product of “messy” and internalized processes. While a few scholars of foreign policy formation acknowledge the role of ethics and morality in drafting foreign policy, the discussion is frequently incomplete.

challenging endeavor. It suggests the need to engage in deeper considerations of human psychology to explore variables that are not only unobservable but highly contestable. It is questionable whether from a theoretical perspective this will be helpful.

Still, for a project examining the policy choices of national leaders who are confronting issues consequential to the future of their nation and the security of its inhabitants, we need a theoretical framework that assists our analysis of human behavior. We need an analytical approach that is not limited to focusing on outcomes. At the same time, we need an approach that focuses our attention on variables material to our understanding of a particular relationship between nations. Constructivists offered a partial solution by focusing on the process of identity formation rather than delimiting the substance.⁵⁸ Their use of identity influenced both the methodological and conceptual adaptation by securitization theorists.

IV. Securitization

There are instances in which conceptualizing identity is less elusive and more consequential. In particular, conflict sharpens identity because it often requires an identity-affirming choice in opposing an adversary.⁵⁹ In such situations, national identity is forged by the reaction of the populace in one nation to the encounter with the other, as well as by the feeling of solidarity with fellow “compatriots.”⁶⁰ National solidarity

See e.g. Christopher Hill, *The Changing Politics of Foreign Policy* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 17.

⁵⁸ See Appendix I for an examination of how constructivists understand the concept of identity.

⁵⁹ P. J. Conover and B. E. Hicks, ‘The Psychology of Overlapping Identities: Ethnic, Citizen, Nation and Beyond’, in *National Identities and Ethnic Minorities in Eastern Europe: Selected Papers from the Fifth World Congress of Central and East European Studies, Warsaw, 1995*, ed. Ray Taras, International Congress of Central and East European Studies (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1998), 35, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-26553-4_2.

⁶⁰ Dichotomization in the us-them format amidst conflict renders identity so salient that other political considerations become periphery. David Moshman, ‘Us and Them:

involves citizens internalizing their shared objectives to embrace values and objectives that produce a collective identity. When facing the possibility of experiencing armed conflict, the fundamental value driving the formation of the collective is the shared desire for security from the threat posed by the adversary.

Understanding security concerns and their societal effects are essential inquiries of a project examining relations between states in the Middle East, particularly when one of those countries is Israel. Insecurity has marked the existence of the Jewish people from biblical times to the present. Similarly, the search for security has dominated Israeli political discourse since the founding of the state in 1948. Israel's struggle to survive is an identity trope voiced both by Israelis and Jews around the globe.⁶¹

In this section, I look at how security concerns have informed refinement of constructivism by the development of securitization theory. I begin with an overview of how security studies provided the foundation for the new theory. I then look at the key concepts of securitization, examining the meaning of the requisite existential threat and the elements of the securitization process. I conclude this section with a discussion of how securitization theory informs this project.

A. From Security Studies to Securitization

Security studies developed from the neorealist tradition of scholars as a way of studying the use of force by states in the international arena. In an article entitled "The Renaissance of Security Studies," Stephen Walt defined the discipline as the "study of

Identity and Genocide', *Identity* 7, no. 2 (15 May 2007): 118, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15283480701326034>; Peter Hays Gries, 'Social Psychology and the Identity-Conflict Debate: Is a "China Threat" Inevitable?', *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 2 (June 2005): 237.

⁶¹ Neta Oren, 'Israeli Identity Formation and the Arab—Israeli Conflict in Election Platforms, 1969–2006', *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 2 (1 March 2010): 193–204.

the threat, use, and control of military force.”⁶² In its original formation, scholars assigned the term “security” a strict interpretation, which limited the discipline to realism’s focus on the technical specifics of power and force. This provided a means of measuring and interpreting relative power relations among states. Security studies methodically categorized the world into regional subsystems based on competing interests, thereby providing an analytical framework for evaluating the threats that nations posed to one another.⁶³ Proponents argued that intellectual contestation involving rigorous analysis of contingency scenarios would yield ideas by which states could better craft security policies that responded to the multitude of threats they confronted.

That scholars created an entire academic discipline devoted to the study of security is hardly surprising given the political climate of the era in which it developed. During the Cold War and the nascent nuclear age, debates over security policies dominated scholarly inquiry, policymaking, and politics. The scars of World War II were still fresh in the global psyche, and the threat of nuclear annihilation magnified fears of future military confrontations.⁶⁴ The conflicts between East and West, communism and democracy, colonial powers and their colonized subjects, among others, fed a global paranoia.⁶⁵ Since not all of these conflicts involved considerations of war-fighting, over

⁶² Stephen M. Walt, ‘The Renaissance of Security Studies’, *International Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (1 June 1991): 211–39.

⁶³ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 11.

⁶⁴ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, 1; Ole Wæver, ‘Securitization and Desecuritization’, in *On Security*, ed. Ronnie D. Lipschutz (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), 48–49.

⁶⁵ The fear of future war, both conventional and unconventional (i.e. nuclear), more than justified the urgent need for experts to spend time and intellectual capital to imagine what future threats might look like and how they might be countered. Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, as the world changed and the threat of nuclear war began to diminish, the urgency of such pursuits began to decline.

time scholars grew skeptical that “security” study could only be undertaken by those with military expertise or well-versed in the “national security mindset.”⁶⁶ This questioning coincided with the rise of constructivism as an academic discipline, which challenged the logic of realism as the basis for analyzing the relations between nations.

The failure of the realists to anticipate such major upheavals as the collapse of the Soviet Union or Iran’s Islamic Revolution highlighted the need to think about conflict more broadly. Scholars raised new kinds of questions, such as what is the role of domestic arrangements in international behavior; should our understanding of modern conflicts involve more than military analysis; how should we account for non-traditional actors and methods of warfare by non-state terrorists and insurgency campaigns; and will new types of weapons change our understanding of warfare.⁶⁷ Ironically, the diminution of the overarching threat of nuclear war to global security magnified the significance and consequences of what had been regarded as marginal or less significant security concerns. Theorists and strategists challenged us to think anew about the meaning of threat and security. This meant focusing on the role of human actors.⁶⁸

B. Toward a Theory of Securitization

Scholars began by asking the obvious question: “What is security?” And they settled on a simple definition: “Security is about survival.”⁶⁹ The simplicity of the proposition provided the conceptual flexibility necessary to reorient the field toward generally applicable principles of what it means to survive. Survival necessitated

⁶⁶ Jef Huysmans, *The Politics of Insecurity: Fear, Migration and Asylum in the EU* (Routledge, 2006), 15.

⁶⁷ Jutta Weldes, ed., *Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities, and the Production of Danger*, *Borderlines*, v. 14 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.

⁶⁸ Tarak Barkawi, ‘From War to Security: Security Studies, the Wider Agenda and the Fate of the Study of War’, *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 39, no. 3 (1 May 2011): 701–16, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829811400656>.

⁶⁹ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, *Security*, 4.

identifying a threat, determining the intensity of the feared harm, and acting to reduce the probability that such harm will happen. Those engaged in the new security studies sought to create a framework for analyzing a threat, most especially one so serious as to threaten existence. When a danger reached the status of being an imminent existential threat, the scholars spoke of the *securitization* of that threat.⁷⁰ They recognized that a threat could come in many different forms and that the perceptions of the risk might differ. More importantly, they realized that risk perception is often subjective and thus may not reflect objective reality.⁷¹ A threat appearing credible could induce fear of catastrophic harm to a polity even when the probability of its occurrence is low. This meant that an existential threat need not be “real” to produce a collective sense of insecurity.

This redefinition enlarged consideration of security issues from exclusive focus on the realm of the physical – such as the gain or loss of territory, manpower, or materiel – to include the emotional. Understanding security involved more than calculations of physical safety; it necessitated examination of the origins and meanings of the human desire for security. In a conflict, security could involve a zero-sum confrontation in which one group’s search for security could create a sense of insecurity in the other. Booth and Wheeler referred to this inquiry as “the security dilemma,” by which they meant that “those weapons that states can use for their own self-protection potentially or actually threaten harm to others.” This animated the debate over the line between “legitimate self-defense” and “predatory behavior.”⁷² Theorists needed to

⁷⁰ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, 25.

⁷¹ Huysmans, *The Politics of Insecurity*, 22–24; Michael C. Williams, ‘Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics’, *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2003): 520, <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.0020-8833.2003.00277.x>.

⁷² Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics* (Basingstoke England; New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1–3.

acknowledge the role of psychology, emotion, and identity concerns in shaping perceptions of security.

Scholars sought to identify paradigmatic applications of the new theory in order to reduce the occasions for ambiguous ascription to any situation. They singled out the category of existential threats as presenting a situation that creates such a profound sense of collective insecurity that the polity is likely to demand or condone extraordinary state action in response. In the process they sought to identify the criteria for achieving this securitization.

C. Securitization Theory

The Copenhagen School argued that securitization theory allowed for analyzing how an actor invokes or constructs an existential threat to effect fundamental political change.⁷³ They posited that securitization need not be limited to military threats, but may apply to scenarios in which a threat may be neither evidentially obvious nor indisputably imminent.⁷⁴ Particularly in a conflict between nations pervaded by uncertainty, a national leader may aim to instill a sense of insecurity and fear of harm in a polity as a justification for a policy objective. In the absence of an observable imminent threat, a leader constructs a threat narrative, which contains a political “speech act” that defines the threat as existential. This narrative then justifies his proposed extraordinary response.⁷⁵ In non-authoritarian regimes, the agent often enlists elite

⁷³ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, *Security*, 11.

⁷⁴ This expansion suggests that securitization theory may extend beyond an external threat by an enemy with agency to carry it out to other risk categories such as environmental threats that present the possibility of longer term irreversible damage to life and location. Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams, eds., *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*, New Edition (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 44; Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, *Security*, 36.

⁷⁵ The promotion of insecurity moves toward constructing an emergency or crisis that necessitates measures that violate the norms, if not the law, of government conduct in the absence of the emergency. Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, *Security*, 22.

allies from both the public and private sectors, such as the military, the media, the communities, and the academy, among other influential spheres, both to validate his message and to effect change.⁷⁶

A value of securitization theory rests in its acknowledging that, while the perception of danger may be based upon a careful consideration of facts, it may also be founded upon emotion. Moreover, feelings may influence the creation or acceptance of fact. The threat perception drives an expectation of response, both in the pursuit of foreign policy and the operation of domestic politics. The development of a threat as existential is a symbiotic process between leaders and constituents. For their part, political leaders construct or magnify a serious security challenge to a receptive audience. Unless the threat is immediately evident and publicly perpetrated by identifiable enemy actors, the leader must engage in a co-dependent enterprise with his constituents to sustain the fear. They are not, however, equal partners. Leaders control the information to characterize the danger and thus can manipulate the message toward their desired ends. They can, for example, fill the interstices of uncertainty to make the threat more real, or they can devise a narrative that elevates uncertainty into the cause of insecurity. They can assign characteristics and motivations to the enemy, such as endowing the enemy with impressive strength and evil intent.⁷⁷ Conversely, they can characterize their nation as weak or vulnerable, and thus unprepared to prevent an attack. Most importantly, the leaders control the justification for their proposed response. Especially where she is urging sacrifice, the leader must present a narrative

⁷⁶ Rousseau, *Identifying Threats and Threatening Identities*, 5; Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, *Security*, 40.

⁷⁷ Huysmans refers to this as “security framing,” in which leaders strategically distribute and administer fear and trust to signal whom can be trusted and whom should be feared. Huysmans, *The Politics of Insecurity*, 51.

designed to achieve collective acquiescence. A securitized threat is often one that justifies actions that would be unacceptable or unjustifiable in normal times. If the polity accepts the leader's characterization, it validates the legitimacy of the threat and evinces its willingness to accept, or at a minimum not to oppose, the proposed actions. In doing so, they affirm the securitized status of the issue.⁷⁸

i. The Foundation: Existential Threats

Drawing upon constructivists' concept of identity, securitization theorists recognized that the collective's confrontation of a serious threat affects both identity and actions. Perceiving a threat of death, destruction, or even permanent disruption of one's way of life produces a sense of urgency for preventative action. The realization of a looming disaster can alter people's perceptions and judgments of observed facts and affect their capacity to reason and to render moral and ethical judgments.⁷⁹

Securitization scholars posited that their theory assisted the understanding of that class of threats in which societies experience such existential challenges.⁸⁰

The concept of existential threat has several dimensions, including its situational context, its characteristics, and its impact. The situation is important for giving rise to the perception of danger. As a theoretical proposition, identifiable criteria are unnecessary where the conditions contribute to the belief of those living in them that they face an identifiable risk to their life as they currently live it. Securitization involving inter-nation confrontation most frequently occurs in a profoundly uncertain environment. The collective fear is compounded by the absence of evidence regarding the seriousness of the threat, the probability of its occurrence, the likely extent of the

⁷⁸ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, *Security*, 33.

⁷⁹ As Dr. Samuel Johnson once said, "Depend upon it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

⁸⁰ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, *Security*; Wæver, 'Securitization and Desecuritization'.

harm, and the means of prevention.⁸¹ Recognizing the subjectivity of situational perceptions, securitization theorists posited that assessments of reality were not the only drivers of decision making.⁸² That a threat may be perceived or invented by the actors, but not be verifiable by independent evidence, is a salient dynamic in our understanding of the situation. As will be examined in this project, Israeli leaders not only claimed that Iran's development of a nuclear weapon was imminent, they ascribed to Iran's leaders the intent to use it to annihilate Israel. Such claims were plausible but unverifiable.⁸³ Nevertheless, the perception of Iran as an existential threat became a primary focus of Israel's foreign policy.

While there are many types of threats, the characteristics of a securitized threat are those that inform the calculus of the believability in the threat's existence and its capacity to produce injury. I suggest that the characteristics fall into three categories that I call obviousness, imminence, and the nature of the danger. Obviousness refers to the degree to which those who witness or experience the situation objectively recognize that their existence is threatened. A nation that has been invaded by a foreign army is evidently fighting for its existence. By contrast, a state fighting to maintain its control over another country on a different continent may have a harder time convincing its people that the outcome poses an existential risk to their way of life. Imminence represents the temporal element of the calculus. A state confronting a hostile army

⁸¹ The leader's ability to control the distribution of these details, either through himself or through trusted state apparatuses or institutions, grants him unique authority in the creation of situations of insecurity.

⁸² Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counter-Terrorism* (Manchester University Press, 2005), 1, 21, 23; Weldes, *Cultures of Insecurity*, 13; Wendt, 'Anarchy Is What States Make of It'.

⁸³ Israeli and American leaders discounted verifiable evidence that Iran was not pursuing military applications as it developed its nuclear program. To the present time, media reporting and public understanding of Iran's program presumes that Iran was building a bomb. See discussion in chapter 4.

amassed on its border, which is poised to invade, is in recognizably imminent danger. A state locked in a dispute with a foe possessing nuclear weapons, by contrast, may or may not believe that it is a likely target of such a weapon in the near-term. The threat is present, but the probability that it will materialize in the foreseeable future can be quite low.

The nature of the danger refers to the type, manner, and extent of the injury threatened. It is the most debatable element of the calculus. The evident meaning is the risk of death, annihilation, government overthrow, or foreign domination. In short, it refers to a radical and permanent change in one's existence. Adapting the constructivists' understanding of identity, some security theorists argue that the concept of harm can be expanded to encompass challenges that threaten certain essential and fundamental features of society. This has provoked a debate over how far to expand securitization theory beyond situations not associated with actual or probable military engagement. Do political threats to "our democratic way of life," or social threats "to life as we know it," or challenges to our identity such that we may "no longer recognize who we are as a people" qualify as existential threats? Do such situations lend themselves to analysis through the lens of securitization theory? These challenges are worth noting in understanding the analytical framework of securitization, but they need not be answered in this project. We can agree that a narrative claiming a nuclear-armed nation is intending to use its bomb against a targeted nation in the near future would, if believed, be seen as an existential threat by its putative intended victims. We can, of course, debate whether the claims are true or the analysis is accurate, but that is a different calculus.

When a threat is so politically urgent that government leaders deviate from the norms of appropriate conduct to protect their citizens, the extraordinary transforms the

ordinary. This could involve asking or demanding sacrifice from individuals for the sake of protecting the collective or taking preemptive action against an adversary in defiance of international law. In non-authoritarian regimes, political leaders face a high bar when claiming state entitlement to compromise individuals' freedom in order to secure the collective from the threatened harm.⁸⁴ It has long been accepted that a government can mandate sacrifice by its citizens during wartime. It is more controversial when a nation claims that the danger of an attack merits aggressive measures that would not be lawful absent the threat. It is most problematic when there is no basis for verifying that a threat exists.

For a threat to be perceived as existential, fear must permeate the collective and manifest itself in the political consciousness. When the threat and its implications are not unquestionably evident – when, for example, there is no direct past experience that demonstrates the danger posed by the other – the fear must be learned through the dissemination of information about the other's dangerousness.⁸⁵ The messages are often part of a narrative designed to be stored in the collective emotional memory of the citizenry. At the same time, they are designed to mobilize citizens. The leader seeks

⁸⁴ See for example, Leslie E. Gerwin, 'The Challenge of Providing the Public with Actionable Information during a Pandemic', *The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 40, no. 3 (1 October 2012): 630–54. Gerwin notes how the threat of an emergency in a constitutional regime can be used by public authorities to arrogate to themselves extraordinary powers to abrogate constitutional protections and human rights. Historically, leaders have sought public support by identifying a scapegoat "other" as one source of the threat.

⁸⁵ W. W. Grings and M. E. Dawson, *Emotions and Bodily Responses: A Psycho-Physiological Approach* (New York: Academic Press, 1978); Daniel Bar-Tal, 'Why Does Fear Override Hope in Societies Engulfed by Intractable Conflict, as It Does in the Israeli Society?', *Political Psychology* 22, no. 3 (1 September 2001): 603.

to activate listeners to demand that their government take measures to ameliorate the threat.⁸⁶ He may also elicit their commitment to his particular policies.⁸⁷

The leader seeks the public's trust by appearing to identify the source of the fear and then proposing response measures perceived as effective. Huysmans called this process "security framing," referring to how a leader characterizes the threat and its origin through the deliberate manipulation of fear and trust.⁸⁸ In an environment of uncertainty, such manipulation can produce unanticipated consequences. In a study of Israeli society, Bar-Tal explained that a society "oversensitized by fear tends to misinterpret cues and information as signs of threat and danger, searching for the smallest indication in this direction, even in situations that signal good intentions."⁸⁹ Fear can also be contagious; it can infect the collective in a way that mutes the critics or those with calmer instincts.⁹⁰ An emotionally based appeal can deter challenges by invoking the counterfactual that the threat, if unaddressed, will produce the feared harm. Few political leaders want to risk being viewed as reluctant to protect the nation's security or failing to consider the consequences of wrongly belittling the risk. A skillful

⁸⁶ The securitization theorists also invoke the Hobbesian version of the State of Nature to explain the origins of the fear that animates their theory. They explain that the uncertainty concerning whom to trust in the sparse and unforgiving world described by Hobbes creates fear. The self-interest of people operating at their basest level raised the fear that violence could come from anyone at any time. To live in this world meant constantly suspecting others, since each person lacked information about whether the other's intentions were benign or malevolent. The inherent desire to survive left an individual uncertain about whether force or cooperation would best achieve this objective. Jan H. Blits, 'Hobbesian Fear', *Political Theory* 17, no. 3 (1989): 417–31; Huysmans, *The Politics of Insecurity*, 53.

⁸⁷ As I explain in the next section of this chapter, I suggest a leader who seeks to promote his leadership as part of a securitization process is engaging in what I call "populist securitization."

⁸⁸ This observation was not unique to securitization since most human interaction depends largely on individuals distinguishing between those they can trust and those they do not. Huysmans, *The Politics of Insecurity*, 51.

⁸⁹ Bar-Tal, 'Why Does Fear Override Hope in Societies Engulfed by Intractable Conflict, as It Does in the Israeli Society?', 609.

⁹⁰ Booth and Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma*, 62.

politician can even conflate fear and trust by convincing the public that its inability to trust others is itself a source of insecurity. As we will see, Israeli politicians across the political spectrum eventually embraced the perception of Iran's nuclear threat, discounting as untrustworthy intelligence conclusions that Iran was not engaged in nuclear weapons production.

The introduction of fear into the political discourse can have a powerful disruptive effect. It can challenge existing beliefs, or it can obscure reasoning, resulting in ill-conceived actions.⁹¹ It can elevate a security concern above other issues that objectively pose a greater risk to a country. A continuing fear can alter the political landscape.⁹² Demagogues are especially adept at manipulating fear as a strategy to attract a political base of conservatives, reactionaries, nationalists, and nativists who are responsive to themes that vilify the proverbial other, i.e. those excluded from their collective identity.⁹³ If the leader's message resonates with a sufficiently large base, the leader's narrative may become the presumptive source of truth, making it harder for opponents to challenge this largely accepted version of the threat.

ii. The Process of Achieving Securitization

Achieving securitization – meaning that the public fears an existential threat and supports extraordinary policies to respond, allowing the government to institutionalize the threat as a foundation of its foreign policy – is the result of a process. A political

⁹¹ Daniel Bar-Tal, 'Why Does Fear Override Hope in Societies Engulfed by Intractable Conflict, as It Does in the Israeli Society?' *Political Psychology* 22, no. 3 (1 September 2001): 601.

⁹² Experiencing prolonged fear of attack may prompt an overly aggressive response in the form of a first strike. In this scenario, the enemy's actual intentions are irrelevant; perception is all that matters. The Americans invaded Iraq in 2003 fearing that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and refusing to believe contrary evidence.

⁹³ Christina Schori Liang, ed., *Europe for the Europeans: The Foreign and Security Policy of the Populist Radical Right*, 1 edition (Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT: Routledge, 2007), 4.

leader initiates the securitization process and then guides it with his words and actions. The central focus is the threat narrative. Analysis of its content and promotion enables us to identify its messages, the publics it addresses, and its stated and implied purposes. Examination of its public and private dissemination may reveal the narrator's motivation as well as allow us to assess the narrative's impact by looking at the support both he and the policies receive. We can see and test the presence of fear.⁹⁴ This analytical approach does not require that we debate the psychological characteristics of the actors or otherwise speculate on hidden motivations. That may be a worthwhile endeavor, but securitization theory enables a more defined and less hypothetical inquiry.

Deconstructing the process of building a threat narrative, theorists have identified three principal elements which they designate as the referent object,⁹⁵ meaning the threat target; the speech act, referring to the verbalization of the threat as well as its narrative content; and the securitizing agents or narrators. Through this analytic frame, the theorists offered a method for understanding the policy pursuits of a nation that positions itself as endangered by one or multiple enemies.

1. The Referent Object

According to scholar Barry Buzan of the Copenhagen School, securitization is an intersubjective process through which a threat is imbued with the "saliency sufficient to have substantial political effects."⁹⁶ The nature of the threatened injury may vary depending upon the source of the danger and its capacity for harm. Categorically, it may

⁹⁴ Barry Glassner, 'Narrative Techniques of Fear Mongering', *Social Research* 71, no. 4 (1 December 2004): 819.

⁹⁵ As explained below, the referent object is not necessarily the audience for a speech act. The referent object refers specifically to the threat target, while the people who are the audience for the speech act are responsible for deciding the validity of the speaker's claims. In some cases, the referent object may include the audience as citizens of the state or as people who may be in danger, but this is not always true.

⁹⁶ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, *Security*, 33.

be predominantly physical, political, psychological, economic, or something else, but it must result in producing in the listener feelings of insecurity sufficient to stimulate demands for response measures. The challenge may target physical safety, territorial control, or living environment, or it may threaten key features of one's identity that will alter continued existence.⁹⁷ Buzan refers to the target of such threats as the "referent object," which he claims can be a collective entity, such as the nation-state, a formal or informal group, or an individual. The referent object can, but need not be the audience the speaker is addressing. The audience, however, must be profoundly affected by the danger to the referent object.

As discussed above, the leader evaluates or employs a threat calculus, including imminence, temporality, and nature of the danger in order to craft a narrative detailing a threat to the referent object. The result is that the individual or collective listener will perceive a significant danger to physical being or the capacity to exercise determination. The latter can range from a disruption of daily routine to the inability to exercise sovereignty over territorial space.

The identification of the referent object has important political consequences. As we will see, Israeli leaders not only cast its state as the target of Iran's alleged nuclear weapons development program, they sought to include Europe among the referent objects. For example, Benjamin Netanyahu claimed that if Iran acquired nuclear weapons, it might aim a bomb at Europe. If Europeans were inclined to perceive such a

⁹⁷ The last of these, identity, is especially relevant for this discussion. It is the most fluid of the concepts and is therefore the hardest to define in terms of what constitutes an "existential" threat. This has a secondary implication, as well, in that it is also the most easily exploited or manipulated by resourceful leaders to create or intensify a conflict. "They are threatening our way of life" is a common political refrain that captures the obscure limits of the threat to identity while imbuing it with a degree of urgency similar to a more tangible object. Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, 33.

threat, a fear-driven demand for a response might obscure the technological and political realities, which made this an unlikely scenario.

2. The Speech Act⁹⁸

Buzan and his Copenhagen School colleagues Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde explain that the process for transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary begins with what they call a “speech act.”⁹⁹ Taken literally, it is a public declaration made by a leader or agent identifying a significant, potentially life-altering, security threat. This rhetorical moment has a purpose: it aims to create in the listener a sense of insecurity and fear for one’s wellbeing. As discussed above, the speech act need not be accompanied by tangible documentation of the accuracy of the claims or by actual performance. To initiate the securitization process, however, it must contain the “grammar of security,” meaning that the speaker’s chosen language presents a scenario in which the threat is or may become existential such that a conventional response will prove inadequate to ensure security.¹⁰⁰ By creating the impression that normal options are foreclosed, the actor leads the public toward acquiescence in extraordinary actions.

In addition to identifying the threat, the securitizing agent uses the speech act to propose, issue, or seek approval for an exemption from the normal rules that should govern behavior or action in a less threatening environment. The “ticking time bomb” scenario provides the extreme example of the operation of securitization. A credible

⁹⁸ The securitization theorists use the speech act to refer to the particular rhetoric associated with providing the content of the threat’s characteristics. This section examines the speech act as they define it. In this project, my use of threat narrative includes the speech act but also refers more broadly to the content of the account of the danger including its history, the actors, its tropes, and other details that serve the narrator’s political objectives. See also discussion above in section IV.C.i. discussing the theory’s requirement that the threat must be existential.

⁹⁹ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, *Security*, 26.

¹⁰⁰ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, 33.

assertion that some number of people face imminent death arguably justifies extraordinary actions to locate the bomb and prevent it from exploding. Uncertainty suspends concern for whether or not the threat actually exists. What is important for the securitization process is that those to whom the speech act is directed believe that such a threat is credibly probable.¹⁰¹ Similarly, whether the threat is capable of causing the ascribed harm is also marginally significant in the moment.¹⁰² The ticking time bomb scenario, however, is not the paradigmatic threat since it has limited value for long term engagement in the political contestation process. Unless it is a repeated motif, such as terrorism, it will not long serve as the basis for formulating policy under continuing conditions of uncertainty.

Since rhetoric is an art and the speech act is a persuasive tool, securitization is often a creative process. The construction of a threat can be part of an overt or subtle political strategy. For example, a speech act favored by demagogues involves the threat of immigrants as the dangerous other. The agent may picture a direct threat, such as linking aliens to criminal or dangerous acts, including terrorism or the carrying of diseases, and seek to elevate the risk to a crisis. A leader may use the presence of immigrants to exploit feelings of racism or nationalism to promote his leadership and his policies. Even if the claimed linkage proves inaccurate or the danger nonexistent, the perception may linger.¹⁰³ A securitization initiative may also subtly aim to prioritize a shared concern as a diversion of attention from other social or political issues, such as

¹⁰¹ This, as Mercer points out, often depends on one's selection and interpretation of evidence and an assessment of risk, both of which rely on emotional considerations. Mercer, 'Emotional Beliefs', 240.

¹⁰² It may, for example, affect the actor's credibility to sustain the support of a base willing to accede to proposed response measures.

¹⁰³ Emily M. Farris and Heather Silber Mohamed, 'Picturing Immigration: How the Media Criminalizes Immigrants', *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 6, no. 4 (2 October 2018): 814–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2018.1484375>.

economic woes, which defy easy solution. Whereas a leader's base may hold differing opinions regarding solutions to economic challenges, they may share the sense of insecurity posed by an external foe.¹⁰⁴ The message may not be totally negative: in addition to engendering fear and insecurity, the agent may promote feelings of patriotism and nationalism as well as hope for a more secure future.

When the presence of one or more of the threat characteristics is debatable, including its existence, its imminence, or its probability of actualization, the speech act exhorting action is often directed to a polity willing to accept the speaker's claims rather than to state officials who must approve the speaker's proposed action. This strategy has two benefits. First, the collective is more susceptible to emotional appeal and thus can be an effectively mobilized to press officials for action. Second, securing the public's emotional investment reduces opposition either by discouraging skeptics from questioning the threat characterization or diminishing the receptivity of the listener to disputants. These benefits are co-dependent but examining each will help in understanding how a threat narrative may be constructed and deployed as a speech act.¹⁰⁵

The Copenhagen School posits that when a leader appeals to emotion to achieve securitization, the speech act is critical. A skillful politician with powerful oratorical skills addressing a receptive audience can manipulate legitimate situational concerns associated with present developments and future uncertainty to craft a narrative that initiates the securitization process.¹⁰⁶ To succeed, the agent must recognize the

¹⁰⁴ Kenneth Prewitt, 'The Politics of Fear after 9/11', *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, no. 4 (2004): 1129; Gus Martin, ed., *The New Era of Terrorism: Selected Readings* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004).

¹⁰⁵ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, *Security*, 24–25.

¹⁰⁶ The receptiveness of the audience is relevant in this discussion since there would likely be a limit on what people would take seriously. A far-fetched claim risks rejection. Abstraction can, however, help a politician use "national security interests" or

subjectivity of the enterprise, selecting messages that will resonate with his target audiences as both credible and disturbing. The securitizing agent can seize upon a singular disruptive incident,¹⁰⁷ or he can marshal a series of events around which he will craft his narrative.

A speech act must contain essential elements that effectively detail the threat. As discussed above, these include identifying the source of the threat and its characteristics: the real or imagined evidence of its existence, its imminence, and the expectation of harm.¹⁰⁸ In an uncertain environment where the characteristics are not evident, the securitizing actor will seek to engage his audience by prioritizing emotion over critical analysis.¹⁰⁹ He may even disguise his objectives in initiating the securitization process. For example, he may be less interested in taking the proposed actions than in using the proposal to bolster public support for his image as a fearless leader. Similarly, the vilification of the threat source as an implacable enemy may be a leader's strategy for building a collective based upon a shared foe.

As we will see in this project, the Iran threat narrative masterfully combined plot elements of a morally corrupt, apocalyptic clerical regime; clerics acquiring nuclear

“protection of the homeland” as a pretext for action against an entity that is not an obvious threat.

¹⁰⁷ The bombings on September 11, 2001 provide an example of a leader using a singular event to initiate a sustained existential threat narrative. President George W. Bush claimed that the bombings necessitated an enlargement of executive powers in a “war on terror,” including those that would arguably be considered illegal in normal times. His narrative included rhetoric aimed at altering Americans’ perception of their national identity and security. See e.g.

George W. Bush, ‘Transcript of President Bush’s Address to a Joint Session of Congress’, 20 September 2001, <http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript/>. (“These terrorists kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end a way of life.”)

¹⁰⁸ See section IV.C.i.

¹⁰⁹ According to Buzan and colleagues, if military capability was the principal basis affecting a nation’s sense of security, “Western Europe would have been as concerned, if not more concerned, with the United States as they were with the Soviet Union after the end of World War II.” Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, *Security*, 58–59.

weapons; a nation intent on annihilation of Israel; and an Israeli leader who is singularly willing to confront the world and tell the “truth.” Each of these propositions is sufficiently credible but largely unverifiable. Together they picture a potential disaster, which inhibits opposition from those unwilling to risk being wrong. Thus, Israeli leaders refused to believe intelligence reports that Iran was not building a bomb, but instead continually predicted imminent acquisition of the lethal weapon. That their predictions might prove inaccurate was inconsequential.

3. Securitizing Actors

The identity of the speaker and his methodology of delivery are critical contributors to the securitization process. A person shouting from atop a box on a street corner is unlikely to gain as much political traction as an opinion leader, such as a high-ranking government official or a nationally syndicated columnist. Thus, the Copenhagen School stresses that public support for the “securitizing actor” is a necessary component of the securitization process. The securitizing actor, who engages in the speech act, must possess sufficient social and political capital to have the means and capability to convince the public of both the existence and nature of the threat.¹¹⁰

Three factors are necessary for an actor’s success: perceived access to information, a significant platform for dissemination, and credibility. For listeners to perceive that the speaker is worthy of trust, they must see him as knowledgeable about the subject matter he is addressing. He will enhance his standing and increase the salience of his arguments if listeners believe he has access to information unavailable to

¹¹⁰ While the securitizing actor is generally the source of the speech act, there are others who may influence the securitization process. Buzan calls these “functional actors,” or “actors who affect the dynamics of a sector.” They can act directly or indirectly, intentionally or not, to influence perceptions of security-related issues. They may also facilitate or enhance the capability of a securitizing actor to deliver a resonant message. Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, 36.

them. The more he can monopolize the information sources relevant to his themes, the better he can control the threat content. The speaker's institutional position or affiliation can augment the perception of his knowledge and credibility.¹¹¹

The actor must also have the ability to deliver the message. Here, both the delivery platform and the "significance" of the audience influence the impact of his speech.¹¹² The place of delivery can enhance the dissemination of the message and the respect it earns. Speeches before official bodies, in prominent forums, or at respected public functions foster a presumption of credible content. Hence, the delivery platform can facilitate the diffusion of the message. An important address might garner media attention, reproduction and dissemination, and public discussion and analysis. In the age of the Internet, social media, and 24/7 news coverage, dissemination is less challenging, and the physical delivery platform may be less consequential. Still, the fact that an identifiable audience invited a particular individual to speak can raise the profile of a would-be securitizing actor. In addition to the value of the invitation, the listeners can validate the speaker's message, especially if the organization or its members disseminate the speech or discuss its content with others of similar stature.

The third criterion is both the predicate to and consequence of the knowledge and location conditions. To be considered credible, the actor should appear to be knowledgeable about her topic. For her message to be received, absorbed, and adopted by her listeners, it must resonate with them. It is not enough for the speaker to be heard; the listeners must believe the speaker is worth their time and attention. To be sure, a speaker's credibility is no longer determinable by objective criteria. In today's

¹¹¹ Institutional reputation is not necessarily transferred to the speaker. Depending upon the audience, an institutional affiliation can undermine credibility, particularly when the institution has a known political agenda.

¹¹² Williams, 'Words, Images, Enemies', 527.

world, the ideological compatibility of the speaker and listener might, without more, make the former credible.¹¹³ In an age of “truthiness” and cognitive dissonance, factually inaccurate messages may still be received as credible.¹¹⁴

Ironically, a speaker lacking a reputation for credibility may have an easier time disseminating a message of questionable veracity than an actor with a reputation for honesty.¹¹⁵ For example, a conspiracy theorist who concocts a message resonant with a niche audience may see his message amplified and inserted into the public discourse. It may then be adopted and repeated by a successor securitizing actor with access to a more prominent platform and a larger audience.¹¹⁶ By contrast, an actor who cultivates a reputation for honesty can undermine his credibility by proffering information that turns out to be false or misleading. General Colin Powell’s advocacy for war with Iraq, which used false intelligence reports that the country possessed weapons of mass destruction, stained his reputation and provided grounds for critics to question his continuing credibility as United States Secretary of State. In a situation where the issues

¹¹³ Charles G Lord, Lee Ross, and Mark R Lepper, ‘Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, no. 11 (1979): 2098–2109.

¹¹⁴ Colbert, ‘The Word - Truthiness’.

¹¹⁵ Leaders’ ability to shape these narratives has increased as a result of the information age, which has made it easier to propagate and disseminate information that fits with their preexisting worldview. In extreme cases, leaders may be able to alter the contours of “truth” through the repeated use of falsehoods, eventually convincing the public to accept their version of events. Scientific studies have shown that listeners who hear false statements are predisposed toward believing them since they must first mentally accept these statements in order to process and understand them. Likewise, the sheer repetition of these claims makes them harder to mentally dismiss, creating a situation known as “illusory truth.” Daniel Gilbert, ‘How Mental Systems Behave’, *American Psychologist* 46, no. 2 (February 1991): 107–19; Lynn Hasher and David Goldstein, ‘Frequency and the Conference of Referential Validity’, *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 16, no. 1 (1977): 107–12.

¹¹⁶ During the 2016 presidential campaign, candidate Donald Trump drew several of his claims about his opponent and the consequences of American policies from conspiracy theorists, who are widely considered to be fringe political commentators. Despite the absence of verifiable fact (or, in some cases, proof that they were lies) the claims were treated as credible by many of the candidate’s supporters.

are complex, emotional, and frequently opaque, a leader's false assertion may not as readily undermine his credibility among his followers.

A securitizing actor's access, platform, and perceived trust does not guarantee that she will act credibly. Unique competence may even enable a leader to manipulate a situation for professional self-promotion. In this project, we will see how those with expertise were not immune from overstating a threat assessment or embellishing a threat narrative. This is not necessarily an abuse of trust if the actor believes the results to be in the best interests of his constituents. The practice becomes perverse when this belief is grounded neither in facts nor data but rather in the conviction that one's leadership is critical for the wellbeing of the nation. Similarly, experts may validate a threat narrative based upon questionable motives. For example, military leaders may secure additional investment in military readiness due to the perception of imminent danger. The image of a sword of Damocles looming over an ill-defined but serious threat is often a powerful message when delivered by a respected member of a nation's armed forces.

In this project, I will explore how Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu constructed a threat narrative based upon the disputed existence of an Iranian nuclear weapons program and the unverifiable claims that Iranian officials would imminently attack Israel using such weapons. Relying upon his access to supposedly restricted information and multiple public forums, he aimed emotionally-charged messages at both a domestic constituency and an international audience. Netanyahu succeeded in crafting a message that met the criteria for securitization, but he failed to attain the support of world leaders for preemptive military action against Iran.¹¹⁷ After initial

¹¹⁷ The major world powers including the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council and Germany rejected Netanyahu's entreaties not to negotiate with Iran. After

challenges to his message at home, he succeeded in effectively solidifying the securitization of the Iran threat. I submit that he both overcame the opposition of Israelis who questioned whether their country faced nuclear annihilation, and enhanced his position as the leader who would protect them by employing an additional strategy. I now turn to how populism enhances securitization efforts, which will serve as the theoretical lens for this project.

V. A Proposed Modification to Securitization Theory

A. Introduction: Adding Populism

The Copenhagen school makes a compelling case for extending securitization theory beyond its original application to situations involving dangers posed by military-based threats. Enlarging the scope of what can be classified as a threat in securitization analysis, however, risks overgeneralization.¹¹⁸ The requisite “existential” modifier that elevates security threats is rhetorically and operationally malleable, and different types of threats may involve unique variables in the danger calculus. While it is beyond the scope of this project to explore the extent and consequences of the theory’s extension, it is useful to identify the challenge of doing so since it will assist in explaining the modification I am proposing for this project. I suggest that extending the theory to situations involving a threat, the existence and characteristics of which are uncertain, raises the question of whether to focus only on the requisite elements of the securitization process. Such a narrow inquiry will likely not provide a sufficiently complete understanding of how an actor succeeds in constructing a threat to effect fundamental political change.

reaching and implementing an agreement, newly elected President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the deal. See Epilogue.

¹¹⁸ Ole Wæver, ‘Securitization and Desecuritization’, in *On Security*, ed. Ronnie D. Lipschutz (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), 47.

One danger associated with expanding the reach of a theory developed in one context to materially different situations is that it can erode the relevance of context-specific detail. In concentrating on finding and analyzing the criteria shared across varying circumstances, we might overlook or deemphasize the role that idiosyncratic factors play in influencing the actor's choice of securitization tropes and the resonance of the speech act with his intended audience. We risk diminishing our capability to understand the power of the actor and his narrative.

When an actor manipulates the public's perception of security to produce political change, context matters. Political context refers to the environment, events, and infrastructure in which the action is occurring, and also to the personal qualities of the securitizing agent and the publics she is addressing.¹¹⁹ The physical elements are generally observable and thus are more easily categorized than is the personal. The latter includes the beliefs, ambitions, personality traits, and other individual qualities of the leader as well as the emotions and conceptions of collective identity held by his listeners.¹²⁰ These may be matters involving subjective judgments or preferences, which are difficult to account for objectively or to include in an assessment of criticality in understanding the outcome of a securitization process.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Williams, 'Words, Images, Enemies', 527.

¹²⁰ Rousseau, *Identifying Threats and Threatening Identities*.

¹²¹ This project will identify several historic moments in which context helps explain Israeli leaders' actions and decisions. The contextual elements include both domestic considerations and international developments. As I will discuss *infra*, two of the most salient moments depended upon the political environment and the characteristics of the individuals acting in that space. These were the 2005 election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Iranian President, which enabled Benjamin Netanyahu to refine the populist tropes that he would eventually deploy as Prime Minister, and the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which enabled Israeli leaders to tangibly associate the Iran threat with physical violence and thereby promote it to the Israeli public. See discussion *infra* at Chapter 4, Section IV, Part A and Chapter 4, Section V, Parts A-B.

Theorists are understandably reluctant to incorporate elements that defy categorization. It is difficult to account for the influence of humans' emotions in both the decisions of the actors and the impact upon the listeners. While securitization theorists acknowledge that the actor makes an emotional appeal for support, analysts examine the message content, evidence of public acceptance, and subsequent government conduct to assess the power of that appeal. Securitization is achieved when the public appears to believe that an existential threat merits a response that may require a change in accepted norms for national action.¹²² Working backwards from the change, we might examine how the actor initiated and justified the actual or proposed disruption, especially the characteristics he ascribed to the threat and the expectations he created by proposing a particular response. Securitization theory, however, elides over consideration of how and why the securitizing agent succeeded in achieving public acceptance of his claims, focusing instead on the threat calculus without inquiring into the broader context.¹²³ These inquiries involve considerations of emotion and motivation, which admittedly are subject to manipulation and misunderstanding when examined *ex post facto* as part of an effort to explain an outcome. The analysis is complicated by the potential for audience bias. For example, the tendency toward confirmation bias – prioritizing information that agrees with preexisting viewpoints – increases the likelihood that individuals who are already sympathetic to a false belief will fully embrace falsehood even at the expense of contradictory facts.¹²⁴

¹²² Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, *Security*, 21.

¹²³ Weldes, *Cultures of Insecurity*.

¹²⁴ Citing the work of social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, Tom Nichols notes that when people are confronted with facts that contradict their values, the common response is for people to reject the facts and try to justify their beliefs. Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (New York, NY: OUP USA, 2017).

In an inter-nation conflict, it does not always follow that a case for extra-ordinary action against an enemy based primarily on the threat calculus will succeed in winning public support. When analyzing a nation's response to the danger posed by its foe through the lens of a securitization process, it may also prove helpful to widen the inquiry to examine the political and social context in which it is occurring. I thus suggest a refinement of securitization theory applicable to circumstances in which a political leader initiates a securitization process under conditions of uncertainty – especially when there are questions about the existence of the threat and the assessment of its characteristics – and in which the threat narrative indicates that the leader is seeking support for an extra-ordinary response while engaging in self-promotion of his position and power. In such instances, I submit that we should examine the leader's strategies for securing public acquiescence as well as the domestic political context in which he is promoting his foreign policies. Specifically, I am proposing that we determine whether populism is influencing the securitization process, and if so, how it is contributing to our understanding of the conflict and its potential or actual outcomes.

“Populist securitization” provides a more detailed analytical frame for examining a leader's invocation of an existential threat in pursuit of his foreign policy and his domestic leadership. At first glance, this may appear an odd coupling of concepts. Securitization as a theory is an academic enterprise. I do not maintain that an actor is consciously guided by the components of the theoretical process, but rather that the theory provides researchers with a method for analyzing a situation in which a crisis of public insecurity may result in transformative change. Populism, by contrast, is a political philosophy, which can guide a would-be leader in strategic decision-making as he seeks

to secure or enhance his political power.¹²⁵ Securitization and populism fit together because policies and actions directed at a threat response require a leader to make rhetorical appeals to the polity designed to mobilize support for power-enhancing actions and, by extension, for his leadership. When populism is used as a modifier of securitization, it refers to the use of populist-inspired strategies for building political power that facilitates the leader's capacity to elicit collective fear and insecurity in support of a response likely to involve extraordinary measures.

Populist securitization is thus both an expansion and cabining of the applicability of securitization theory. While it assumes that securitization can be expanded beyond military engagement, it does not lead us into the debate over how far it may extend. I suggest populist securitization applies to a particular category of perceived existential threats ascribed to a nation's exogenous enemy. Populist securitization arises in two situations. In one, a leader uses populist messaging to secure public acceptance of the threat narrative and his proposed response.¹²⁶ Although the promotion of an existential threat may become a dominant element of the leader's governing strategy, the populist tropes are primarily reserved for accruing political support for new and potentially disruptive policies in response. The situation is usually occasioned by an unexpected disruptive event, and the official leading the response need not otherwise qualify as a

¹²⁵ Angelos-Stylianos Chryssogelos, 'Undermining the West from Within: European Populists, the US and Russia', *European View* 9, no. 2 (December 2010): 267–77.

¹²⁶ The U.S. Congress hastily enacted the 342-page USA Patriot Act giving the government vast new powers to abrogate constitutional liberties to protect the nation's security from terrorism. Few legislators admitted to reading the entire act, and even fewer opposed passage. No elected official wanted to be accused of failing to keep America safe by questioning whether the delegation of such broad and unchecked power was necessary. F. James Sensenbrenner Jr., 'Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT ACT) Act of 2001', H.R.3162 § (2001), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-bill/3162>; Michael Moore, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Documentary, Drama, War, 2004.

populist. Following the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush echoed the populist “us-against-them message” both domestically and internationally in seeking support for enlarging his executive power in the new “war on terror.” He famously launched his counterterrorism campaign by warning, “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”¹²⁷ On the home front, Bush minimized opposition to his arrogation of new powers by replacing debate with ridicule of those raising objections to the government’s interference with constitutionally protected liberties.¹²⁸

The second scenario for populist securitization occurs when a populist leader engages in a securitization process by constructing an actual or manufactured existential threat and invoking populist strategies to promote public acceptance of his proposals and his leadership. Analysis of the securitizing actor’s narrative and conduct reveals that the process is a vehicle for enlarging and maintaining the leader’s base of political support and hence, his power. In some cases, a leader can echo populist tropes in employing his narrative to enlist the international community in supporting a proposed extraordinary initiative. As I will show, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu embraced populism in the construction, promotion, and maintenance of the Iran threat narrative. In so doing, he engaged in a securitization process that positioned him to launch a “crusade” domestically and internationally to disable Iran’s nuclear program. This included leading the opposition to his allies’ engagement in conventional diplomatic negotiations to reduce the threat.

¹²⁷ George W. Bush, ‘Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People’ (20 September 2001).

¹²⁸ Leslie E. Gerwin, ‘Planning for Pandemic: A New Model for Governing Public Health Emergencies’, *American Journal of Law & Medicine* 37, no. 1 (1 January 2011): 154–56.

Bearing in mind the applications of this modified theory, in the remainder of this section I briefly examine populism as a strategy of political leadership and then discuss the value populism adds to securitization theory. In the concluding section, I explain how populist securitization informs this project.

B. Populist Leadership

In recent years, populism has arguably evolved into a strategy masquerading as an ideology, which is employed and embraced by certain national political power-seekers.¹²⁹ Commentators speak of a global “wave of populism” sweeping away the old political order. As with all political movements, debates abound over the origin, meaning, impact, and consequences of this modern political development.¹³⁰ In some versions of its history, the modern iteration grew out of nineteenth century America and the formation of the “People’s Party.” Born in 1892 out of a frustration with the existing two-party structure, small farmers rallied against the tyranny of large industrialists and moneyed interests whom they viewed as the opposition establishment or self-centered

¹²⁹ We have witnessed several highly visible political victories described as populist inspired, while commentators have noted the danger that populism poses to constitutionalism. In 2016 two unexpected electoral victories that generated attention – the decision of a majority of United Kingdom voters to leave the European Union (known as “Brexit”) and election by a majority of the Electoral College of Donald Trump as President of the United States – illustrated the power of populist mobilization. Populist candidates in the style of Trump and Brexit stood for election in France (Marine Le Pen), the Netherlands (Geert Wilders), Austria (Heinz-Christian Strache), and Germany (Alexander Gauland and Alice Weidel), among others. Victor Orban in Hungary is another example of a successful populist politician.

¹³⁰ A search of the EBSCO academic database reveals how this debate has expanded in recent years. A search for the term “populism” returns 912 academic articles for 2017. The average for the previous four years was 600 articles per year, an increase of over 50%. The results for news articles were even more striking. From 2012-2015, the average annual count for articles containing the term populism was 348 per year. In 2016 and 2017, the average jumped to 1299 articles per year. Academics, particularly comparative law scholars, are concerned that the emergent populist leaders represent a threat to constitutionalism. See, for example, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).

elitists.¹³¹ Some claim that the term originated in the 1824 United States presidential campaign of Andrew Jackson, who defined a “populist style” of politics by running as an outsider against Washington elites.¹³² Whatever its precise history, populism developed worldwide as a mobilization of “ordinary folk” against powerful actors.¹³³ A political leader, or would-be leader, frames the contestation by positioning himself as the protector of the interests of common people from the tyranny of the elite members of the established order. Such appeals often arise in electoral contests, but they are also increasingly emerging as themes in rallying support for disruptive policy changes.

Princeton University political philosopher Jan-Werner Müller offers an analytical framework useful for identifying and evaluating the impact of current populist movements. In a 2016 book entitled *What is Populism?* Müller examines the methods and messages employed by populist politicians, both during their campaigns for office and, more importantly, in their methods of governing. Müller challenges the proposition that candidates run as “outsiders” only to become “insiders” upon winning political office. Rather, he defines the current version of populism as a deeper and more robust philosophy. Populist leaders are not simply developing a mass appeal to harness the anger, frustration, or resentment of their followers against a common enemy to win elections.¹³⁴ He claims that leaders have a broader purpose.

¹³¹ Sergiu Gherghina, *Contemporary Populism: A Controversial Concept and Its Diverse Forms*, ed. Sergiu Miscoiu and Sorina Soare, 1st Unabridged edition (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 105.

¹³² Harry Watson, ‘Andrew Jackson, America’s Original Anti-Establishment Candidate’, *Smithsonian*, 31 March 2016, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/andrew-jackson-americas-original-anti-establishment-candidate-180958621/>.

¹³³ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 2.

¹³⁴ As Müller notes, this last definition is uniquely useless, since appealing to the masses and gaining the largest share possible of popular support is what all politicians in democratic systems seek to achieve. Müller, 3.

According to Müller, populism is a “particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified – but...ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior.”¹³⁵ In his conception, populist movements arise by claiming to represent a cohort of what they call the “real people” against “everyone else,” including those in the political establishment. The defining characteristic of the movement is that it includes only those who are alike in form or philosophy, or both, and excludes all who are different.¹³⁶ This makes the movement anti-pluralist since its members recognize only those like themselves as the totality of the population.¹³⁷ The morally tested inclusion of likeness and the exclusion of difference is the distinctive premise of Müller’s definition of populism. One qualifies for movement membership, and in autocratic societies for citizenship, based upon one’s political views. The “people” tolerate no loyal opposition or informed dissent.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Müller, 19.

¹³⁶ This echoes the constructivist and securitization theorists who emphasize that identity involves identifying the “other” by which a polity defines itself. The initial objectives of the populist strategist and securitization theorists differ, however. Whereas the latter seek to understand identity as a description of the inclusive collective, the populists seek to exclude those who differ from or disagree with them. In both cases, the leader seeks to craft a message that will appeal to his identifiable base.

¹³⁷ Müller refers to the concept of “holism” defined by Nancy Rosenblum: it is “the notion that the polity should no longer be split and the idea that it’s possible for the people to be one and – all of them – to have one true representative. Nancy L. Rosenblum, *On the Side of the Angels: An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 20.

¹³⁸ Müller’s conception of populism borrows heavily from the writings of the German political theorist Carl Schmitt. Schmitt’s writings’ preference for authoritarian declaration of will over the democratic expression of popular sentiment help explain populists’ rejection of liberal democracy as a legitimate system of government. As Schmitt writes (and Müller quotes): “The unanimous opinion of one hundred million private persons is neither the will of the people nor public opinion. The will of the people can be expressed just as well and perhaps better through acclamation, through something taken for granted, an obvious unchallenged presence, than through the statistical apparatus...[P]arliament appears an artificial machinery, produced by liberal reasoning, while dictatorial and Caesaristic methods not only can produce the acclamation of the people but can also be a direct expression of democratic substance

Müller applies his vision of populism to the act of governing, demonstrating how it is not merely a campaign strategy that disappears after an election. He describes three features of populist governance. First, populists hijack the state apparatus in furtherance of their acquiring and maintaining power. Second, populists are willing to engage in corruption and mass clientelism – to exchange government favors for political support. Finally, populists seek systematically to restrict civil society and suppress any form of meaningful dissent.¹³⁹ Populist leaders use these methods to accrue and sustain power and to maintain the “will of the people.”

One consequence of populist governance is that it fosters and magnifies natural suspicions of entities that exist beyond the leader’s control. Examining the domestic operations of populism, Müller shows how a populist leader creates distrust of democratic processes that allow dissent and enable political opponents to thwart populist policy proposals. A populist can turn a defeat into an opportunity to undermine democratic legitimacy. For example, he may claim that an electoral defeat or a failure to achieve a governing objective was due to his opponents’ conspiratorial maneuvering “behind the scenes” to prevent the populist-desired outcome.¹⁴⁰ Populism need not effect legal change to succeed in threatening democratic governance and constitutionalism. Sowing the seeds of doubt, while creating an environment in which

and power.” Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy, New Edition (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), 16–17.

¹³⁹ Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 4.

¹⁴⁰ Blaming identifiable opponents for failure justifies denouncing them as “enemies of the people.” Recently, populist leaders and autocrats have adopted the attack “fake news” to undermine media credibility. Josef Stalin was the first to use the label “enemies of the people” in the show trials of the 1930s. The deliberate confusion of fact and fiction by leaders means that the population is unable to easily determine the leader’s veracity. Müller, 32; Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (Tim Duggan Books, 2017), 125.

citizens are intimidated from voicing opposition, may succeed in restricting the public discourse and participation in organizations promoting a pluralist civil society.¹⁴¹

In addition to distinctive message content, a populist leader employs certain strategies for promoting his positions. For message delivery, the populist leader eschews use of a hierarchical communications structure in favor of direct engagement with followers. This preference distinguishes populism from purely authoritarian rule. Whereas an autocratic leader cultivates an image of imperiousness and encircles himself with a coterie of political, military, and security elites whom he often sends to do his bidding, the populist presents himself to the people as one of them. He personally speaks with, rather than to, them in a manner that promotes his desired optics.¹⁴² His goal is to position himself within his followers, to share their emotions, and thus to emphasize the unity of the “us” against the “other.”

It is possible that technology, notably social media, will challenge the populist’s capability to control his message content by excluding opposing voices from the public discourse. On the one hand, Internet platforms make it easier for critics to air opposing views. On the other hand, it is equally, if not more, likely that the democratization of information production will have a detrimental effect on identifying truth.¹⁴³ At present, social media offers a populist the opportunity to continuously reinforce his messages

¹⁴¹ There is a similarity here with totalitarian political philosophy in that both seek to obscure objective truth as a way to stifle debate. As Hannah Arendt wrote in her seminal work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “Before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion fact depends entirely on the power of man who can fabricate it.” Müller’s version of populism, as such, represents a kind of early stage of this seizure of power and a nascent effort to actively try to define what is true and what isn’t based on the leader’s philosophy. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, First edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973), 350.

¹⁴² Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 35.

¹⁴³ Michela Del Vicario et al., ‘The Spreading of Misinformation Online’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 113, no. 3 (19 January 2016): 554, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1517441113>.

while appearing to be engaged in a conversation with those who follow him, and to respond rapidly to critics via Twitter or Facebook messages with no restrictions on the fabrication of false claims. Moreover, most social media is not suited for serious discourse. Some worry that the popularity of these communication methods, which tend to be nonintellectual and superficial, may become the preferred method of political discourse.¹⁴⁴ Such a development would foster populism, which is well served by anti-intellectualism.

Related to the populist's preference for direct communication and anti-intellectualism is his need to diminish the role of experts having the knowledge and credibility to contradict the veracity of the populist's claims. Recently, this has included efforts to discredit unfavorable news reporting. Populists call factual reporting "fake" and often offer their own versions of the facts, which may be demonstrably untrue.¹⁴⁵ Through direct communication and salient messaging, an effective populist leader can convince his base to suspend their critical thinking and discount the information offered by elites.¹⁴⁶ A populist leader who is trusted by a sufficiently large base can thus succeed in marginalizing his critics and muting the questions of skeptics. American historian Richard Hofstadter described the process by which citizens become actively contemptuous of expert advice: "The citizen cannot cease to need or to be at the mercy of experts, but he can achieve a kind of revenge by ridiculing the wild-eyed professor, the irresponsible brain-truster, or the mad scientist, and by applauding the politicians as

¹⁴⁴ Adam Clark Estes, 'Facebook Slowly Realizing It Might Be Ruining Democracy', Gizmodo, 22 January 2018, <https://gizmodo.com/facebook-slowly-realizing-it-might-be-ruining-democracy-1822293524>; Mostafa El-Bermawy, 'Your Filter Bubble Is Destroying Democracy', WIRED, 18 November 2016, <https://www.wired.com/2016/11/filter-bubble-destroying-democracy/>.

¹⁴⁵ Jason Schwartz, 'Trump's "fake News" Mantra a Hit with Despots', *Politico*, 8 December 2017, <http://politi.co/2yOHp2N>.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Jan-Werner Müller, interview by Jonathan Leslie, Princeton, NJ, 9 August 2017.

they pursue the subversive teacher, the suspect scientist, or the allegedly treacherous foreign-policy adviser.”¹⁴⁷

Although populism is generally examined as a movement to secure domestic power, its strategies and message themes can prove useful in promoting foreign policy objectives. For example, a populist leader invoking national security as the basis for a policy decision can minimize transparency that would allow for meaningful debate. In a situation with a high degree of uncertainty, which necessitates decisions based upon incomplete information, a populist’s willingness to prevaricate concerning the justification for his proposals, to devalue experts, to strategically use opacity, and to mobilize his followers to discourage opposition may position himself to construct a threat narrative virtually unchallenged.

C. The Populist Refinement of Securitization

In a political environment in which issues compete for priority on the policy agenda, securitization rests on creating compelling content for the threat narrative as well as on getting the polity to internalize the message of insecurity such that they support, if not demand, a government response. The more debatable the question of the threat’s existence, and the less evident its characteristics of obviousness, imminence, and destructive capability, the more the strategic deployment of populism can assist in amassing public support. The populist appeal is distinct from the narrative’s substantive content that details the threat characteristics. Its message is to communicate the populist ideal of a collective identity that must be safeguarded by acting against the enemy. In the populist’s version, the outsiders are not only the

¹⁴⁷ Although Hofstadter, writing in the 1960s, believed his observation to be a uniquely American phenomenon, the global explosion of populism has extended the applicability of his reflection. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (Vintage, 2012).

domestic power elite, but also the exogenous foe against whom the collective is exhorted to unite. Thus, the warning to potential dissenters holds that that they must choose to join with the collective “us” or they too will be targeted as “enemies of the people” and accused of being allied with the source of the threat.¹⁴⁸ A national leader can extend the populist message to challenge an international audience to support his cause. He need not be as provocative as President Bush in challenging world leaders to ally with the United States in its war on terror.¹⁴⁹ Standing tough on the international stage may also enhance the leader’s image at home.¹⁵⁰ He need not achieve his international objectives to mobilize domestic support for his foreign policy agenda. Rather he may succeed in rallying his people with the exhortation that they must stand united in opposition to all who fail to support the justness of their cause.

Populist messaging can heighten the promotion of insecurity inherent in the threat narrative. In general, the absence of transparency and knowledge of the complexities and nuances associated with the conduct of foreign affairs reduces the ability of the listener to challenge the populist’s claims. The vilification of elites seeks to discredit experts who may offer contradictory evidence. Even in democracies, a leader can resist calls for transparency by asserting his special access to classified material associated with national security. A populist leader, particularly one untroubled by

¹⁴⁸ This also is a distillation of the Schmidt “friend-enemy” distinction, in which every supporter, or real person, is a friend and every opponent is a non-person or enemy. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

¹⁴⁹ See discussion of President Bush’s post-9/11 address to Congress, *supra*.

¹⁵⁰ Michael Tomz, ‘Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach’, *International Organization* 61, no. 4 (October 2007): 821–40, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818307070282>; Richard C Eichenberg and Richard J Stoll, ‘The Political Fortunes of War: Iraq and the Domestic Standing of President George W. Bush’ (The Foreign Policy Centre, July 2004); Nate Silver, ‘Second Thoughts About Obama and Bin Laden: It’s Not Just the Economy, Stupid’, *FiveThirtyEight* (blog), 2 May 2011, <https://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/02/second-thoughts-about-obama-and-bin-laden-its-not-just-the-economy-stupid/>.

truth, is positioned to manipulate his access to information and thus to emphasize the superiority of his knowledge. Such a leader may prefer to invoke imagination to construct a threat rather than resort to marshalling facts that may or may not support the message he wishes to deliver. When the threat narrative is based upon claims about a foreign power, which can neither be challenged nor verified, the narrator controls the threat profile.

Even when the threat narrative is fact-based, the securitization process necessarily includes an appeal for the polity's emotional investment. The narrator seeks to get the collective to internalize the message of fear and insecurity, which will manifest in their support of his proposed extraordinary response. Populism's focus on emotion in its appeal is often used to convince the listener to suspend her insistence on veracity of a leader's claims in favor of supporting his personal leadership. Populist appeals may be especially useful in a securitization process where a leader seeks to replace a factual predicate with an emotion-based perception.¹⁵¹

Securitization and populism may operate symbiotically in other instances to reinforce the conditions for each. For example, Müller points out that populists "thrive on conflict and encourage polarization."¹⁵² Securitization, by definition, relies upon the existence of a conflict, while polarization promotes awareness of a collective's identity that can serve as the threat target. Similarly, by promoting the threat as existential, the securitization process seeks to foster an ongoing crisis, a condition that can empower populists. Invoking populist tropes allows a leader to elevate a threat narrative into a

¹⁵¹ Populist securitization can be self-sustaining. The populist leader creates the threat simply by deign of being a populist but is also promising to protect the people from the threat that he represents.

¹⁵² Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 4.

moral crusade,¹⁵³ in which he seeks both to establish the actionable insecurity required for securitization and to promote himself as the crisis manager and the people's savior.

The addition of populism to securitization theory can supplement the analysis of a leader's decisions associated with a conflict between his nation and another. In a dynamic and uncertain environment, we need to understand how a leader calculates the threat posed by his country's adversary as well as how he promotes it to the publics whose support he seeks. By examining the content of his narrative, we may identify the actor's justification for his policies. Moreover, by identifying the tropes that infuse his efforts to achieve domestic and international support for proposed norm-challenging action, we may learn how and why the threat narrative resonated with the public. It may help us discern the leader's motivation underlying his pursuit of the securitization process. Through this analytical frame we can acquire a clearer understanding of a conflict's many dimensions, including what happened, or is happening, and why.

VI. Populist Securitization in this Project

In examining the modern conflict between Iran and Israel, especially after Israeli officials advocated responding to Iran's nuclear development program, a populist securitization framework offers three avenues of inquiry. First, it focuses our attention on how Israeli leaders constructed a threat narrative based upon the prospect of Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon, and how Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu transformed the securitization process into a moral pursuit. Second, it facilitates our investigation of how Israeli leaders generated fear and then sustained the perception of Iran as an existential threat, even after evidence emerged contradicting key elements of the

¹⁵³ A morality-based message may assert that the enemy does not subscribe to our values and threatens the continued existence of our way of life. To eliminate the exogenous threat requires joining in a shared enterprise to avert the apocalypse.

narrative. This inquiry yields an explanation for why Israeli securitization agents argued that Iran's conduct was generating an unprecedented crisis that justified responding with extraordinary measures. Third, as the narrative became a part of the political discourse, we can see how Israeli leaders justified decisions that challenged accepted norms of government conduct. This examination includes communications addressed both to domestic publics and to international audiences in an effort to win their allegiance to Israel's leadership in the conflict. We see how Netanyahu strategically prioritized Iran on Israel's foreign policy agenda, using it both to promote his domestic political leadership and to divert international attention from Israel's conduct toward the Palestinians. The findings yielded by this approach reveal the synergies resulting from combining populism and securitization.

If we accept Müller's characterization of populism as involving a moral pursuit, then a populist may derive significant political benefit from initiating a securitization process. A narrative that transforms a potential threat into an existential danger creates an opportunity for a populist to manipulate the disruption to promote himself. While Israeli leaders sought to securitize the Iran threat for a variety of reasons, including a sincere belief in the danger, Netanyahu elevated the threat response into a moral crusade. Presenting the threat as a Manichean struggle between good and evil, he positioned himself as the protector of the public good. Congruent with this approach, he effectively delivered two distinct, but strategically convergent messages: his critics were wrong, and the enemy could not be trusted. In his version of the conflict, Israel, as the morally superior nation, is the victim of Iran's perfidy. Anyone critical of Netanyahu's threat calculation or claiming that the danger can be reduced through conventional diplomatic means is either naïve or uninformed. His opposition to Iran as well as to risk-reduction achieved through negotiations with Iran's leaders positioned him to lead the

crusade for the long term. Negotiations, in his telling, are not only fruitless but potentially counterproductive since the enemy will not engage in good faith.

Ascribing evil intent and untrustworthiness to one's adversary is an effective trope in inducing fear and insecurity.¹⁵⁴ In a populist's telling, diplomacy and cooperation are tools of deception. In the uncertainty pervading an inter-nation conflict, accusations of enemy misconduct may gain traction even among optimists. Those who fear an enemy are generally more outspoken and motivated to organize than are skeptics with questions or idealists without effective counterarguments.¹⁵⁵ The populist's version of distrust is more pernicious than the usual suspicions held by parties refusing to engage in negotiations that they believe will be unproductive due to irreconcilable differences. Rather, populists reject negotiations because peaceful engagement acknowledges the opponent's humanity, and thus they see the agreement to engage as conferring legitimacy upon the other's claim. Many Israeli leaders cast Iran and its leaders as undeserving of inclusion in global discourse and international transactions. They sought to isolate the country, and they succeeded in their advocacy of tough sanctions. Netanyahu was particularly vocal in casting aspersions on his enemy's intentions and motivations. Ironically, his infusion of populist rhetoric into his narrative intensified as world leaders engaged in negotiations with Iran to suspend its nuclear program. He persisted even as the global perception of the danger posed by Iran weakened.

The conduct of Israel also reveals the caution associated with belligerent rhetoric. Effective populist leaders must maneuver carefully to avoid causing a

¹⁵⁴ David Campbell, *Writing Security : United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity /*, Rev. ed. (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 88.

¹⁵⁵ Bar-Tal, 'Why Does Fear Override Hope in Societies Engulfed by Intractable Conflict, as It Does in the Israeli Society?', 601.

confrontation that cannot be controlled. Thus, in most cases, a populist will not be served by starting a war or even in motivating his followers to press for war.¹⁵⁶ The calculus shifts when the leader directs his message to an international audience seeking to build a coalition that he believes will overwhelm his enemy's resources such that the outcome is predictable. He may, however, still press for a military intervention as a means of highlighting the threat as posing an existential crisis and promoting securitization. Although Israel's leaders had long publicly hinted about taking preemptive military action against Iran's nuclear enrichment facilities, they also implied that they were aware of potential unintended and unexpected consequences of such actions.¹⁵⁷ Netanyahu reportedly came very close to launching a military intervention, but he too abandoned the plan when he could not convince the United States to stand behind Israel's action.¹⁵⁸ Notably, his decision not to act did not markedly diminish his rhetoric advocating such action.

¹⁵⁶ Modern warfare introduces a variety of variables that the leader cannot control, including messaging at odds with reporting of facts. When the costs borne by the population engaged in warfighting, notably the death of soldiers and the required sacrifices, reach a "tipping point," support for the endeavor and its leader is likely to erode.

¹⁵⁷ Whereas in 1981 and 2006, Israel had opted for preemptive military action against Iraqi and Syrian nuclear reactors, respectively, the decision to use a cyber weapon reflected an awareness of the relative sophistication of the Iranian program, as well as the potential consequences direct military action could engender. Ari Shavit, 'Israel's Former National Security Adviser Warns Against Wasting Time on Iran', *Haaretz*, 5 July 2012, <https://www.haaretz.com/ari-shavit-don-t-waste-time-on-iran-1.5201369>; Ari Shavit, 'Israel Air Force Veteran Says That on Iran Issue, Leaders Are Playing With Our Lives', *Haaretz*, 20 July 2012, <https://www.haaretz.com/ari-shavit-bombing-iran-will-ruin-us-says-iaf-vet-1.5268484>; Yossi Alpher, 'When Would Israel Attack Iran?', *The Forward*, 1 September 2010, <http://forward.com/opinion/130937/when-would-israel-attack-iran/>.

¹⁵⁸ Obama never outright refused to rule out a "military option" against Iran, even as Israeli anti-Iran rhetoric reached its zenith in 2012, but he refused to commit beyond generalities. The U.S. also began withholding critical intelligence from Israel on the basis that the information might help Israel plan a strike. Netanyahu interpreted these actions as a signal that the United States was not prepared to commit to backing up Israel should he decide to take unilateral action. Anshel Pfeffer, *Bibi: The Turbulent Life and Times of Benjamin Netanyahu*, 1 edition (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2018).

As this study notes, it took considerable time and effort for Israeli leaders to convince the public that Iran posed an existential threat. For years after Iran had obviously restarted its nuclear development program, discussion in Israel of Iran's threat was an elite enterprise. Public opinion polls did not include questions about Iran, and the issue rarely found its way into public speeches or political discourse. My analysis shows that the surprise election and belligerent rhetoric of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Iran's president in 2005 followed by the shock associated with Israel's disastrous conduct in the 2006 Second Lebanon War inspired an Iran narrative that finally resonated with the Israeli public. Ahmadinejad rhetorically went to war with Israel with his anti-Semitic and Israel-threatening language. His messianic posturing helped convince Israelis that Iran's leaders might act on their threats, even if that meant bringing harm upon themselves. A year later, following Israel's failure to defeat Hezbollah in Lebanon, Israeli officials blamed Iran. The reputational injury to the country and its military together with the war casualties reified the threat for many Israelis. Netanyahu and others raised the stakes by reminding the public of Iran's nuclear ambitions. Seizing upon the intensified crisis-induced insecurity, Netanyahu sought once again to lead Israel as its prime minister by promising to restore the country's sense of security. He succeeded in becoming Israel's longest serving prime minister. As Müller notes, "A 'crisis' is not an objective state of affairs but a matter of interpretation."¹⁵⁹ Benjamin Moffitt adds, "Crisis does not just act as a trigger for populism, but...populism also triggers crisis."¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 42.

¹⁶⁰ Benjamin Moffitt, 'How to Perform Crisis: A Model for Understanding the Key Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism', *Government and Opposition* 50, no. 2 (April 2015): 189–217, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2014.13>.

In diffusing his message beyond his political base, Netanyahu was particularly effective in leveraging the Iran threat assessment of elite Israeli hawks. For a populist, the promotion of fear is the currency for crisis creation, but it is perception that drives the fear and optics.¹⁶¹ A populist who amasses a committed base of supporters willing to publicly embrace his warning and support his leadership can seed a wider mobilization. Netanyahu could count on the agreement of politicians who shared his view of Iran as well as a vociferous right-wing media and popular culture. Thus, even if his followers did not fully internalize the fear of Iran, their loyalty to his leadership, together with official and media affirmation of Iran's danger, enabled them to ignore or dismiss evidence that contradicted Netanyahu's threat assessment. Moreover, while Netanyahu had a fair share of political opponents, no one wanted to risk being wrong about the Iran threat by openly disputing the level of danger. Doubters could not organize with the same intensity as believers, and academics, experts, and opposition media were dismissed as elitist with an agenda that did not serve "our people's" interest.

Netanyahu also embellished his narrative by enthusiastically embracing the populist practice of using, or more accurately misusing, history to ground his narrative in the illusion of long-standing enmity between Persians and Jews. Populists, like many politicians, recognize that their claims need not be accurate, but the details must sound plausible to listeners.¹⁶² The willingness of populists to challenge the norms of governance facilitates the reimagining of history to situate a current conflict within a tale of national survival. The narrator can unfold the story so as to legitimate the

¹⁶¹ Glassner, 'Narrative Techniques of Fear Mongering'.

¹⁶² It no doubt helps if the historical events are sufficiently long ago that few people remember the exact details, or they are obscure to the point where there will not be a chorus of historians seeking to contradict the claims made by the leader; but neither of these are prerequisites for using history as a rhetorical tool for creating populist securitization.

“people’s role” in furthering the leader’s objectives.¹⁶³ Using a historic trope implies that the enmity, and by extension the current crisis, is irresolvable as well as long-standing. Historian Timothy Snyder calls this abuse of history the “politics of eternity,” which he describes as a “masquerade of history...It is concerned with the past, but in a self-absorbed way, free of any real concern with facts.”¹⁶⁴ Snyder argues that the vision of the future is irrelevant in populist politics, because in looping back continuously to the past, populists displace policy as a means toward creating a better future. The present slowly morphs into a continuous but unobtainable struggle for this idealized version of the past, deepening divisiveness and enmity between the populists’ supporters and their enemies.¹⁶⁵ For many Israelis, particularly the religious conservatives comprising Netanyahu’s base, the past is the promise of the realization of the biblical vision of the idealized Jewish state. At the same time, for Jews all over the world, Israel represents a commitment to prevent another attempt to annihilate the Jewish people. Netanyahu exploited these themes in propagating his Iran narrative.

To retain control of his narrative while promoting it to the widest possible audience, Netanyahu uniquely adapted the populist practice of direct engagement with followers to reach all those who might be receptive to his message. Israel is a small country and politics is a participatory enterprise, such that direct communication

¹⁶³ Interview with Jan-Werner Müller.

¹⁶⁴ In his recent book, *On Tyranny*, Snyder describes the process by which politics of eternity replaces the politics of inevitability. The politics of inevitability describes the general sense of apathy that develops in society when there is a feeling that “nothing can really change, that the chaos that excites us will eventually be absorbed by a self-regulating system.” It refers to the idea that history has ended, à la Francis Fukuyama. Snyder points out how national populists take advantage of this general malaise to turn the system on its head using the politics of eternity. In effect, they use the imagined past to break the present. Snyder, *On Tyranny*.

¹⁶⁵ Timothy Snyder, *Timothy Snyder Speaks, Ep. 4: Sadopopulism*, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOjJtEkKMX4>.

between officials and constituents is not a distinctly populist leadership practice.¹⁶⁶

When operating in the international arena, however, Netanyahu on several occasions took his message directly to those he sought to mobilize in support of his cause. In a remarkable move, Netanyahu bypassed the American president and addressed a joint session of the United States Congress, implicitly criticizing the administration's policy.¹⁶⁷ Moreover, Netanyahu frequently spoke to American Jewish groups in the evident hope that he could enlist them in delivering his message to their elected representatives and to those policymakers with whom they had a relationship.¹⁶⁸ He did not keep secret from American voters his opinion that the 2012 Republican opponent of President Barack Obama's reelection bid, Mitt Romney, would be a better "friend" of Israel.¹⁶⁹ Netanyahu also arranged to deliver some of his most important attacks on Iran in English.¹⁷⁰ His objective in taking such extraordinary action was to enlist influential foreigners' support for taking unconventional action against Iran.

* * *

¹⁶⁶ Still, earlier in his career, Netanyahu was a pioneer in terms of bringing "American style" political campaigning to Israel, targeting his message directly to voters to gain support rather than building up coalitions of party elites. Pfeffer, *Bibi*.

¹⁶⁷ Benjamin Netanyahu, 'The Complete Transcript of Netanyahu's Address to Congress', (3 March 2015), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2015/03/03/full-text-netanyahus-address-to-congress/>.

¹⁶⁸ On several occasions Netanyahu traveled to Washington, DC to address the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) annual conference ahead of critical junctures in the negotiation of the Iran Deal. AIPAC was a major lobbying force opposing the agreement, encouraging delegates to urge their Congressional representatives to vote to reject the final text.

¹⁶⁹ Harriet Sherwood, 'Binyamin Netanyahu Gambles on Mitt Romney Victory', *The Guardian*, 20 September 2012, sec. US news, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/20/binyamin-netanyahu-gambles-on-mitt-romney>.

¹⁷⁰ In addition to speeches to major American Jewish groups, Netanyahu frequently used his appearances on the world stage, including diplomatic meetings with other global leaders, to criticize Iran.

I submit that populist securitization provides a useful framework for examining how the relations between Iran and Israel devolved into an enmity, created a crisis mentality, appropriated Israel's foreign policy agenda, and produced little public disagreement in Israel over possible responses to the threat. Despite the drastic change in the relationship between the two states wrought by the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the assumption of power by a theocratic regime, it was far from inevitable that Israelis would view Iran as an existential threat meriting construction of a narrative filled with hyperbolic rhetoric and moral suasion. When one looks past the rhetoric, there are few fact-based reasons why the polity of a democratic nation with serious domestic security challenges and multiple hostile neighbors would accept that Iran was its most pressing foreign policy challenge. To be sure, there are reasons for enmity and mutual distrust between the ruling officials in both countries. But the fact that the Islamic Republic engaged in developing a nuclear capability – which so concerned Israeli leaders that they constructed a political strategy and crafted a narrative aimed at positioning Iran atop Israel's national security agenda – offers an incomplete explanation for the obsession with Iran as an existential threat. We need also to examine how Benjamin Netanyahu invoked populist themes and methodologies to construct and communicate an Iran threat narrative and his strategic objectives in doing so. Although this project ends before the events and actions it examines will have concluded, populist securitization enables us to understand the development of the current Israeli-Iranian conflict, its escalation, and its possible future directions.

Chapter Two: History – From Friendship to Enmity

I. Introduction

This chapter reviews the shared history of two nations in a volatile region who interacted with one another for more than two millennia. The modern leaders of Israel and Iran draw upon their peoples' long and rich heritages as the basis for generating hostility toward the other. The presence of historical themes in modern political narratives and how they are used to achieve specific policy aims will assist our analysis of these actors' motivations and decisions.

The interaction between Iran and Israel is not a linear story. It includes accounts of peoples living within the same geographic space, of one people being ruled by another, and of two sovereign nations cooperating in pursuit of shared interests. Given the historic timespan of their interaction, the enmity that is the subject of this study is only a very recent development. Yet if one omits this history and turns to the remaining chapters, one could be forgiven for forming a very different impression of this relationship. It is curious to consider how Jews, who pride themselves on their learning and knowledge of their people's ancient heritage, allow Israeli leaders to construct narratives containing dubious historical claims. Perhaps they consider such alternative interpretations inconsequential to modern-day realities. But when the narratives serve as policy justifications, the historical inaccuracy cannot be dismissed as inconsequential.

Ironically, perhaps the best known "historic" interaction between Persians and Jews never happened. The story of a Persian king and his Jewish queen is told in the *Book of Esther (Megillat Esther)*, which is included in the canon of the Hebrew Bible and ensured at least an annual public reading by Jews worldwide. As we shall see, although it comes down to us in writing, its retelling by an Israeli politician changes the story to offer a different message than the one traditionally told. This chapter begins with a look

at the ancient history between Jews and Persians and its salience for today's leaders. It then briefly reviews the experience of the Jews who lived in Persia and later Iran. The modern relationship begins shortly after the establishment of the State of Israel, and I discuss the little-known strategy of cooperation between the Shah and the new Jewish State. I conclude with an examination of the early years of the Islamic Republic and the events that set the stage for the present conflict between Israel and Iran.

II. Jews in Persia and Iran

A. Biblical Accounts

The history of what may be considered the relationship of Iran and Israel begins as one of friendship between Persians and Jews. Scholars believe that Jews dwelt within the boundaries of what is today modern Iran as far back as two centuries before the founding of the Persian Empire.¹⁷¹ Significantly, the history of interactions between these two nationalities does not accord with modern narratives explaining the current conflict.

Two biblical accounts are particularly material to an understanding of the Persian-Jewish relationship both in antiquity and modernity. One, rooted in history, tells of how Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Achaemenid Empire, liberated the Jewish people from their exile in Babylon in 539 B.C.E. A believer in religious freedom, Cyrus allowed Jews to practice their religion openly within his kingdom. He also allowed those who so desired to return to their homes in Jerusalem. There he helped finance the reconstruction of the second temple.¹⁷² The authors of the Hebrew Bible lauded the

¹⁷¹ Mehrdad Amanat, *Jewish Identities in Iran: Resistance and Conversion to Islam and the Baha'i Faith*, Reprint edition (London; New York: I.B.Tauris, 2013), 18.

¹⁷² Temple construction would not actually begin until after Cyrus's death under the reign of his successor Darius I, but Cyrus is still widely credited with having set the precedent for religious tolerance under the Achaemenid Empire. Amanat, 18.

benevolence of Cyrus, while the Temple demonstrated the religious tolerance extended to Jews in the Persian Empire. In the Hebrew Bible text, God is said to refer to Cyrus as His *mashiach*, one of only five people so designated and the only gentile to receive the honorific.¹⁷³ While the Hebrew Bible's 23 mentions of Cyrus are all positive, not all scholars agree that Cyrus merited the credit.¹⁷⁴ Whatever the actual facts, however, the status of the Persian king in the Jewish canon testifies to a historic friendship that is obscured in the modern accounts of historic enmity.

The second biblical "historical" account is better known than the deeds of Cyrus, but it is also most likely a fairytale.¹⁷⁵ *Megillat Esther* tells of a Persian king who spared the Jews from annihilation when his Jewish queen revealed the perfidious plot of his chief minister. The tale is set in the Sassanid Empire during the reign of King Ahasuerus. The young maiden named Esther, who hides her Jewish identity, becomes queen by winning a beauty contest. Meanwhile, the King's minister, Haman the Aggagite, angered by the refusal of Jews to bow down to human royalty, convinces the King to order the

¹⁷³ This passage appears in the latter half the book of Isaiah, known as "Deutero-Isaiah." Scholars attribute it to an author who lived after Cyrus the Great. Deutero-Isaiah (45:1) Moshe Reiss, 'Cyrus as Messiah', *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (1 July 2012): 160.

¹⁷⁴ See, for example, Diana Edelman, who argues that the historic chronology does not fit the account of Jews returning under the reign of Cyrus. Lester Grabbe questions the historicity of a decree that enabled the Jews to return to their homelands. He admits that they could do so but suggests that the return was a "trickle" over an extensive period of time. By contrast, the first century CE historian Flavius Josephus provides the text of a letter written by Cyrus to the Jews of his kingdom. Diana Vikander Edelman, *The Origins of the Second Temple: Persian Imperial Policy and the Rebuilding of Jerusalem*, 1 edition (Routledge, 2014); Lester L. Grabbe, *The History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period, Volume 1: Yehud, the Persian Province of Judah* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), 355; Flavius Josephus, *The Complete Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William Whiston, 1st Edition (Attic Books, 2008).

¹⁷⁵ There is no historical evidence independent of the Bible that any of the events depicted in the Book of Esther took place, nor is there any evidence of a Persian plot to murder Jews en masse. Daniel Estrin, 'Iranians and Israelis Are in a Battle over History — and the Holiday of Purim', *The World* (Public Radio International, 25 March 2016), <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-03-25/iranians-and-israelis-are-battle-over-history-and-holiday-purim>.

killing of all the Jews in the kingdom. Esther is charged by her Uncle Mordechai to reveal her identity to the King and to implore him to save her people. According to the story, she hatches a scheme that includes risking death to approach the king without invitation and then inviting the king and his minister Haman to a private dinner party. There she reveals Haman's plot against her and her people and pleads with the king to spare the Jews. The story has a happy ending: the horrified king accedes to his Queen's plea, he orders the death of the wicked Haman, and he names Uncle Mordechai to a high government post. Today, Jews continue to celebrate this deliverance as the annual festival of Purim during which they re-tell the story.

Some accounts, both written and oral, omit certain details of the story's end. The final chapters recount how the king, unable to rescind his royal edict, allowed Mordechai to issue a second royal edict permitting

The Jews in every city to assemble and fight for their lives; if any people or province attacks them, they may destroy, massacre, and exterminate its armed force together with women and children, and to plunder their possessions.¹⁷⁶

The story then details how the Jews both celebrated their reprieve and "got their enemies in their power."¹⁷⁷ It even includes the body count associated with the Jews' attack on "those who sought their hurt,"¹⁷⁸ which numbered upwards of 75,000 deaths.¹⁷⁹ That some choose to omit or obscure this part of the story illustrates the power of different story tellers to use historical narrative to craft their particular messages.

¹⁷⁶ Esther 8:10-11

¹⁷⁷ Esther 8:17-9:1.

¹⁷⁸ Esther 9:2

¹⁷⁹ According to the story, the Jews killed 500 men and the ten sons of Haman in the fortress of Shushan, the capital; and in the king's provinces "they disposed of their enemies, killing seventy-five thousand of their foes." (Esther 9:6, 16). They reportedly did not take any spoils.

The Cyrus and Esther stories retain a place in the history and customs of two distinct and accomplished peoples of the Middle East. The majority of books or articles analyzing the relationship between the nations of Iran and Israel mention these stories as reference points for a historic friendship that contrasts with the modern hostility. Not all scholars agree, however, that these stories have any relevance to modernity. R.K. Ramazani, who wrote an influential history of Israeli-Iranian ties during the twilight of the Pahlavi rule, challenges their explanatory value. He writes of the Cyrus anecdote, “Such basically cultural perspectives seem less useful as a means of policy explication by way of scholars than as a vehicle of policy rationalization by statesmen.”¹⁸⁰ The weakness in his argument rests on his unwillingness to consider how these rationalizations not only animate policy decisions but impact their acceptance among the polity.

It is often difficult to determine whether policy decisions result from situational evaluation or from reasoning backwards from the justification. Whether stemming from analysis or rationalization, historical memory influenced the decisions of Israeli and Iranian leaders in many instances. For example, when Israel’s first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, sought an alliance with Iran shortly after the state’s founding, the Shah invoked Cyrus in his letter of acceptance. The Shah, who was notable for his emphasis on Persian nationalism and history, wrote, “The memory of Cyrus’s policy regarding your people is precious to me, and I strive to continue in the path set by this ancient tradition.”¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ R. K. Ramazani, ‘Iran and the Arab-Israeli Conflict’, *Middle East Journal* 32, no. 4 (1 October 1978): 413–14.

¹⁸¹ Sohrab Sobhani, *The Pragmatic Entente: Israeli-Iranian Relations, 1948-1988* (New York, NY, 1989), 35.

The influence need not be positive nor the memory entirely accurate. Modern Israeli and Iranian leaders have invoked the Esther story as a propaganda weapon in their rhetorical condemnation of one another's nation. To Israelis, the story cautions distrust of an Iranian enemy bent upon destruction of the Jewish people. In their re-telling, Persian anti-Semitism is rooted in the pre-Islamic Persian Empire, suggesting that the story demonstrates a national or ethnic character intent on genocide. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu went so far as to change the narrative to eliminate the role of King Achashverosh (the Hebrew pronunciation of Ahasuerus) in rescinding the edict of annihilation. In his controversial 2015 address before a joint session of the United States Congress on the eve of the Purim holiday, Netanyahu cited the story's significance to that current moment and declared, "Today the Jewish people face another attempt by yet another Persian potentate to destroy us."¹⁸² This was not an isolated comment. Netanyahu repeated his version before the 2017 Purim holiday when he suggested to Russian President Vladimir Putin that the story of Purim illustrates the Persian desire to destroy the Jewish people. When this moment became public, the Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, took to Twitter to rebuke Netanyahu and to correct his depiction of the Persian people as ancient anti-Semites.¹⁸³

Israeli religious leaders echoed their prime minister by drawing attention to the bombastic rhetoric of hardliner politicians in Iran, accusing former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of being the "new Haman," who, like the ancient villain, was threatening the destruction of Israel, this time with Iran's nuclear warheads. One rabbi predicted that "Like Haman and his henchmen before, Ahmadinejad and his supporters would find

¹⁸² Netanyahu, 'The Complete Transcript of Netanyahu's Address to Congress'.

¹⁸³ Arash Karami, 'Zarif Gives Netanyahu Lesson in Jewish Scripture', Al-Monitor, 13 March 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/03/iran-purim-netanyahu-zarif-larjani-esther-persia-history.html>.

their bows destroyed and their swords turned against them to strike their own hearts.”¹⁸⁴ Supposedly, a cyber weapon unleashed by Israel and the United States in the late-2000s, which sought to cripple Iran’s nuclear program, referenced Queen Esther and Haman in its code.¹⁸⁵

The mythologizing was not one-sided. Iranian hardliners have also reinterpreted the Esther story to support their contention that the Jewish state threatens Iran and to justify their anti-Semitism. In their version of events, they challenge the notion that Jews took up arms to defend themselves and speak instead of the Jews conducting an “Iranian Holocaust.”¹⁸⁶ Notably, the story has a different impact in the two countries. In Israel, everyone knows the Purim story whether or not they accept the modern interpretation. In Iran, the story has little traction beyond the religious elite. For both countries, however, the story and its differing interpretations illustrate that factual accuracy has little to do with the power of historical narrative.

B. The Jews of Persia and Iran: 405 BCE to 1979 CE

History records that the descendants of the Jews who followed Cyrus the Great back to Persia after the liberation of Babylon continued to enjoy good relations with Cyrus’s successors. The Achaemenid King Artaxerxes II, who ruled Persia from 405 to 358 BCE, helped encourage a second wave of Jewish migration back to ancient Palestine beginning with the dispatching of a royal emissary, Ezra, to help reestablish the law of

¹⁸⁴ Kim Zetter, *Countdown to Zero Day: Stuxnet and the Launch of the World’s First Digital Weapon* (New York: Crown, 2014).

¹⁸⁵ The researcher found the word “Myrtus” in the coding, a possible translation of Esther’s original Hebrew name, although some dispute this interpretation. Zetter.

¹⁸⁶ ‘ جشن «پوریم» تراژدی غمبار ایرانیان ’, *Farda News*, 1 April 2008, (13 Farvardin, 1387) edition, <http://www.fardanews.com/fa/news/48142>; ‘ انتقاد عجیب از مشای و احمدی نژاد: با انداختن ’, *عصر ایران*, 13 September 2010, <http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/135963>.

the Torah in the territory of Judah.¹⁸⁷ Still, as with Cyrus before him, many Jews opted to remain in Persia. Later, monarchs of the Parthian Empire shielded the Jews from the harsh treatment they suffered at the hands of the neighboring Roman authorities. They allowed Jews to establish a self-governing territory within Persian lands, which included independent political, administrative, and judicial authorities. Jewish texts from this period reflect the goodwill that Persian authorities showed to Jews. Unlike the Greeks, Babylonians, and Romans, there are no negative descriptions of the Persian people or their rulers in ancient Jewish texts. Instead, they depict the Persians mainly as liberators and allies of the Jewish people.¹⁸⁸

This dynamic changed following the Muslim conquest of Persia in the seventh century CE. At the end of the Sassanid Empire and the beginning of the Islamic period, the Persian monarchs adopted a less tolerant position on religious freedom than their predecessors. Forced conversion to homogenize the religious makeup of the kingdom was not uncommon, although this policy objective met with limited success. In the early sixteenth century, following the expulsion of the Mongols from Persia, monarchs of the Safavid dynasty again pursued this strategy. This sparked a wave of Jewish emigration from the kingdom, but some Jews remained and avoided conversion. Thus, despite the efforts of rulers and official policies of intolerance toward non-Muslims, Jews maintained a continuous presence in Iran.¹⁸⁹

It is difficult to discern accurate numbers for the Jewish population throughout the ages. The earliest non-biblical written report on the Jewish population in Persia is

¹⁸⁷ Judah was the southern kingdom of Israel, which contained the site of Jerusalem and the Second Temple, whose construction had been authorized by Cyrus. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael David Coogan, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 220.

¹⁸⁸ Amanat, *Jewish Identities in Iran*, 19.

¹⁸⁹ Amanat, 37.

from the twelfth century CE in which Benjamin of Tudela reports the population to be around 600,000. This number decreased to about 100,000 by the Safavid era, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. It then remained stable into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries under the reigns of the Qajjar and Pahlavi dynasties. Estimates of the Jewish population in pre-Islamic Revolution Iran place the population between 50,000 and 100,000 Jewish Iranians.¹⁹⁰

By most accounts, the Pahlavi dynasty, the last Persian monarchy prior to the Islamic Revolution, did not mistreat its Jewish population. One commentator even described this period as a “golden age” for Iran’s Jews.¹⁹¹ Such a description may be overlooking the fact that the first Pahlavi ruler, Reza Shah, was a well-known admirer of the Nazis and Adolf Hitler. Apparently, he did not subscribe to the latter’s racial views. After the British forced the abdication of Reza Shah following World War II, the son, Mohammad Reza, reportedly was seen as friendly to Jews. According to rumor, he once prayed to a Torah during a ceremonial visit to a Jewish cemetery in Isfahan, where some of the earliest Iranian Jews had settled several millennia before.¹⁹² In reality, the extent to which Jews were accepted within the predominantly Shiite Muslim society is unclear. Ronen Cohen, an Israeli scholar, paints a much darker picture of the pre-Revolutionary treatment of Iranian Jews, writing that the Jews of Iran suffered due to the Shia belief that a person who touches a Jew becomes *najes* or impure.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Cecolin cites the 100,000 figure. The 1956 and 1966 official censuses place the number more precisely at approximately 60-65,000. Alessandra Cecolin, *Iranian Jews in Israel: Between Persian Cultural Identity and Israeli Nationalism*, New edition (London: I.B.Tauris, 2015), 1; Ferydoon Firoozi, ‘Iranian Censuses 1956 and 1966: A Comparative Analysis’, *Middle East Journal* 24, no. 2 (1970): 226.

¹⁹¹ Prof Gawdat G. Bahgat, *Israel and the Persian Gulf: Retrospect and Prospect*, 1st edition (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 28.

¹⁹² Bahgat, 28.

¹⁹³ Uzi Rabi and Ronen A. Cohen, *Iran, Israel & the ‘Shi’ite Crescent’* (Daniel Abraham Center for Strategic Dialogue: Netanya Academic College, 2008), 31.

What we do know is that a relatively small insular Jewish community called Iran home. They survived for millennia amidst a dominant culture that did not accept them as part of their Persian society but also did not physically threaten their existence. Ironically, while the Jewish community was characterized by insularity and refusal to bow down to the Persian King and his courtiers – an act which had provoked Haman to seek their annihilation – the Jews not only survived in the Persian Empire, they refused to leave.

III. Israel and Iran: From Indifference to Collaboration

A. The Founding of the Jewish State

Prior to the twentieth century, Cyrus the Great was the last foreign ruler to encourage Jewish resettlement in the biblically ordained homeland of Israel. In 70 CE, the Romans invaded Jerusalem, destroyed the Second Temple, the building of which Cyrus had facilitated, and sent the Jewish population into exile. With the declaration of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, that exile officially ended. It also provoked Israel's Arab neighbors, Egypt, Syria and Jordan, with support from Iraq, to invade.

The declaration followed a vote of the United Nations the previous November in which the British territory of Palestine was partitioned into two independent states, one Jewish and one Arab. Britain, which had administered the territory under a League of Nations mandate following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, withdrew its forces and administrators.¹⁹⁴ The mandate had been marked by violence between the resident Palestinian population and Jewish emigres displaced by the Nazi Holocaust. British officials, who had sided with the Arabs to prevent the influx of Jews to their idealized homeland, also became the target of attacks from radical Jewish militants. The

¹⁹⁴ 'The Covenant of the League of Nations', December 1924, Article 22, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp#art22.

1948 invasion by the Arab nations signaled their rejection of the partition plan. The Israeli State survived the “War of Independence.” The Palestinians have a different narrative of the event: they did not get their state and instead mark the “Nakba” (catastrophe) in which 700,000 of them were expelled or exiled from Israeli territory. Both peoples acknowledge that the 1948 conflict has yet to be resolved.

The war also represented a humiliating defeat for Israel’s Arab neighbors. They did not want a political and religious anomaly in their midst.¹⁹⁵ They believed British authorities had betrayed them by reneging on promises of Arab autonomy in the region.¹⁹⁶ Moreover, the Arabs lost the fight despite superior troop numbers and natural resource advantages. Their story would feature an account of Palestinian oppression, but the fate of the latter was marginal to their war objectives.

B. The Impact of the Cold War

The establishment of the State of Israel complicated the Shah’s already difficult reign. In the UN partition vote, Iran joined with other majority-Muslim countries in voting against the proposal, but it refrained from joining the Arab war effort following Israel’s declaration of its new state. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi had occupied the Peacock Throne since 1941, beginning his reign with the assent of the British, who had forced his father from office.

¹⁹⁵ Shimoni referred to the Arab view of the Israelis shortly after Israel’s founding as a “foreign enclave in their midst.” Yaacov Shimoni, ‘Israel in the Pattern of Middle East Politics’, *Middle East Journal* 4, no. 3 (1950): 286.

¹⁹⁶ See, for example, the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence, in which the British, in exchange for Arab military cooperation against the Ottoman Empire in World War I, had promised Arab independence following the war. Subsequent British actions, such as the 1916 Skyes-Picot Agreement, which divided up the region under British and French spheres of influence, and the 1917 Balfour Declaration, which pledged British support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine, contradicted that promise.

The early years were turbulent for the 22-year-old shah. After the end of World War II, he had to navigate between the competing East-West superpowers engaged in the Cold War. At the same time, he faced competing demands from his own population, which included a powerful clerical establishment in a nation with a 99% Shiite Muslim majority.¹⁹⁷ For the Shah, the Israel issue held no benefit for his reign.

It is understandable that the Shah's Israel policy in the initial years of the state was, according to Ramazani, one of "calculated ambivalence," in which the Shah avoided making any commitment either for or against the fledgling state.¹⁹⁸ The wait-and-see approach enabled him to maintain the neutrality of his foreign policy in the Cold War between the superpowers. It also allowed him to avoid taking either a losing position or one that would anger his Muslim population, which was sympathetic to the Palestinians' land claims. Moreover, Ramazani notes that the strategy was "in keeping in the basic tenets and thrust of Iranian nationalism" favored by the Shah.¹⁹⁹

As the Cold War intensified, it became increasingly difficult for smaller countries to maintain a façade of detached neutrality. Especially in the Middle East, East and West sought roles in the political and economic lives of the strategically vital and resource-rich nations. The competition for influence challenged the Shah. He owed his throne to the British, and Iran hosted extensive foreign investors, which were positioned to influence the country's domestic politics. The largest investment came from the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), the predecessor to British Petroleum, which at the time was one of the largest oil companies in the world. Granted the exclusive right to develop the Iranian oil fields in 1933 by the Shah's father, the company generated tremendous wealth for the

¹⁹⁷ Firoozi, 'Iranian Censuses 1956 and 1966', 226.

¹⁹⁸ Ramazani, 'Iran and the Arab-Israeli Conflict', 414.

¹⁹⁹ Ramazani, 415.

Shah, for the company, and for Great Britain.²⁰⁰ As a consequence of the generous terms of the concession, the company repatriated significant revenue to Great Britain, while still providing substantial payments to the Shah, thereby reducing his need to develop indigenous technologies for the extraction of wealth. The Shah paid a price for this arrangement: not only was he effectively surrendering some of Iran's economic sovereignty, he was also susceptible to British pressure over his governmental decisions.²⁰¹ This arrangement challenged his ability to remain neutral.

Three years into Israel's statehood, in 1951, a power struggle in Iran pitted the Shah against the country's new Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. The latter assumed office determined to end British economic domination and did so by nationalizing the AIOC and expelling its British employees from the country. The Shah lost the struggle and fled the country. In 1953 an American-engineered – and British-supported – coup d'état restored the Shah to the throne.²⁰² While the details of this consequential event are beyond the scope of this project, it is relevant to note that the eventual narrative ascribes responsibility to the United States for the overthrow of Iran's democratically elected leader in favor of a dictatorial ruler. The Shah would not only allow the West to exploit Iran's wealth, but he would also accept its foreign policy directives. Whereas Mossadegh's government closed the Iranian consulate in Israel, albeit allegedly for budgetary reasons, the Shah's return meant that the move had little

²⁰⁰ By the mid-1940s, the AIOC had established near total dominance over the Iranian oil industry. It was the country's largest employer and a source of significant wealth both to the Shah and to Great Britain. John P. Miglietta, *American Alliance Policy in the Middle East, 1945-1992: Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia* (Lexington Books, 2002), 39.

²⁰¹ Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 61.

²⁰² During his brief administration, Mossadegh closed the Iranian consulate in Israel, although this was allegedly due to budgetary rather than political reasons and ultimately had little effect on the course of Israeli-Iranian relations. Response to Mossadegh's removal in Israel was muted; it did not significantly influence Israel's subsequent pursuit of relations with Iran. Ramazani, 'Iran and the Arab-Israeli Conflict', 415.

impact on relations between Iran and Israel. His actions initiated the popular dissatisfaction that would end with his overthrow and a rejection of his policies.

Israel, too, tried to maintain neutrality in the early years of the Cold War. Both the United States and the Soviet Union voted in favor of the partition, and Israel relied on both for crucial support, financial from the Americans and military from the Soviets.²⁰³ Rather than ally with one ideology over the other, Israel tried to align itself with the United Nations as a global organization. The outbreak of the Korean War made neutrality untenable: The United Nations backed American forces and forced Israel into the Western camp.²⁰⁴

Thus, both Israel and Iran were aligned with the United States when, in 1955, the Soviet Union sought actively to exert its influence in the Middle East. Following an Egyptian army coup that toppled the government of King Faruq, the Soviets backed the presidency of a young charismatic revolutionary named Gamal Abdel Nasser. To the Egyptian people who saw the old regime as corrupt, incompetent, and obsequious to British interests, and who bemoaned their defeat in the 1948 war, Nasser preached pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism. He urged Arabs to unite against their enemies, most notably, Israel. The Soviets saw Nasser and his message as an opportunity to gain a Middle East foothold. They began supplying him with equipment and funding to rebuild the depleted and outdated Egyptian military.²⁰⁵

²⁰³ American Presidents Truman and Eisenhower expressed their support for Israel in its early years, but both were reluctant to provide extensive political or military aid. While the “special” nature of the relationship between the United States and Israel has become conventional wisdom, Cold War strategic concerns dominated the initial period of Israel’s history.

²⁰⁴ Avi Shlaim, ‘Israel between East and West, 1948-56’, *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 4 (November 2004): 657–73.

²⁰⁵ Alexander J. Bennett, ‘Arms Transfer as an Instrument of Soviet Policy in the Middle East’, *Middle East Journal* 39, no. 4 (1985): 756.

The first test of the new alliance occurred a year later when Nasser attempted to nationalize the Suez Canal, a key passageway for maritime trade. Although located within Egyptian territory, western powers had built and now operated the canal. France and Britain joined Israel in invading Egypt. Fearing the destabilizing effect of a regional war, the United States joined the Soviet Union in a United Nations vote condemning the attack. This was not only an odd moment of superpower agreement, but a surprise to the invading armies who assumed that the United States would support their action. In the end, United States President Dwight D. Eisenhower pressured the invaders to withdraw and to surrender the canal to Egyptian forces. In doing so, they handed Nasser both a public relations and a military victory. As the Arab leader willing to stand up to the Israelis and the West, his status rose. He was thus more than willing to accept the Soviets' offer of dramatically increased aid, including advanced military equipment and advisors from Eastern bloc countries.²⁰⁶

Israel and Iran, although not allied with one another, now found themselves with a common enemy as both opposed the Soviet-backed Arab bloc.

C. Becoming Allies: The Periphery Doctrine

i. Different Perspectives

If it is true that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, one would expect that Israel and Iran would seek some kind of alliance. Indeed, although rarely discussed beyond academic circles, the two nations developed a relationship, which came to be known as the Periphery Alliance. One of the challenges associated with examining that alliance is the absence of public documentation associated with its origins. Israel's leaders directed little public attention to Iran, while the academic community

²⁰⁶ Bennett, 'Arms Transfer as an Instrument of Soviet Policy in the Middle East'.

considered Iran's relationship with Israel to be of marginal value. Israel and Iran's shared alignment with the West, at a minimum, suggested that neither nation posed a sufficiently serious threat to the other to merit serious strategic consideration.

It is also notable that few Israeli researchers had a personal attachment to or knowledge of Iran apart from their familiarity with the story of Esther. In his 2015 book examining the alliance years, Yossi Alpher explains that ignorance of Iranian history among Israeli Middle East experts persists to the present such that most have little to no knowledge that the countries had ever been allies.²⁰⁷ Whatever the exact reasons, Israeli leaders never fully recounted or left behind public documentation of their work with Iran.²⁰⁸ It is, however, fair to surmise that both Israel and Iran sought a relationship that would be mutually beneficial and did not anticipate the attendant consequences.

Israel was not yet ten years old when the 1956 Suez Crisis highlighted its precarious strategic position. It enjoyed some support from the United States, which under the Eisenhower Doctrine opposed communist expansionism in the Middle East. Thus, it was surprising when this nominal ally handed a victory to Egypt. As a result, Israel faced an emboldened Nasser leading a pan-Arab movement sponsored by the Soviet Union. Israel, however, was not alone; other non-Arab countries in the region also faced this new threat. According to Shimon Peres, who was serving in the Israeli Parliament (the Knesset) during this period, Israel viewed Nasser as a "new, ambitious Arab 'caliph', supported by the might of a suspect power, [which] could hardly fail to rouse unhappy memories among the Turks and Iranians of dark periods in their

²⁰⁷ Yossi Alpher, *Periphery: Israel's Search for Middle East Allies* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015).

²⁰⁸ Many involved in the strategy are deceased. It is possible that documentation relating to military and intelligence operations remains classified. The absence of primary sources challenges efforts to accurately understand the strategy's place in the history of Iran-Israeli relations.

history.”²⁰⁹ Following the Suez debacle, Israel’s founding Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, then in his second term, pursued an alliance with these nations.

The idea had originated years earlier shortly after Israel’s founding. Ben Gurion, together with the chiefs of Israel’s foreign and domestic intelligence services,²¹⁰ recognized that Israel would need strategic partners in the region.²¹¹ They reasoned that Israel could enhance its prospects for long-term survival if it found partners with whom it at least shared the fear of a common threat. A coalition of non-Arab Middle Eastern nations could serve as a counterweight to the threat of Arab aggression.

Initially, Israel recruited three nations to join its new alliance: Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia,²¹² each of which served a strategic purpose. Turkey confronted Iraq and Syria on Israel’s northern border, while in the south, Ethiopia provided Israel with remote access to the Northern African plateau south of Sudan and Egypt. Israel viewed Iran as the crown jewel of the alliance: it brought geographic, diplomatic, and economic advantages key to the success of the enterprise. Geographically, its long border with Iraq positioned it to counter potential threats from one of the largest and most militarily developed Arab states. Diplomatically, the Shah’s close relationship with the United States following the 1953 coup made him an invaluable resource for fostering better relations with American government officials. Economically, Iran provided access to an energy supply critically necessary for Israel’s economic development. With the influx of

²⁰⁹ Shimon Peres, *David’s Sling* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), 153.

²¹⁰ Reuven Shiloah, founder of the Mossad, and Iser Harel, head of the Shin Bet.

²¹¹ Alpher, *Periphery*; Sobhani, *The Pragmatic Entente: Israeli-Iranian Relations, 1948-1988*, 34.

²¹² There are differing versions of the Periphery participants. According to Alpher, proposed redefinitions primarily occurred post-1977 in response to changing regional circumstances and threat perceptions; they were often used to reverse engineer justification for specific Israeli strategic action rather than as a motivating factor for it. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, I will adhere to only the narrow definition of Periphery as a state-level relationship between the four main partners of Israel, Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia. Alpher, *Periphery*.

new immigrants from the Jewish diaspora, who brought with them an entrepreneurial spirit and technical expertise, Israel could develop rapidly with access to the region's abundant natural resources, which Israel did not have within its tiny piece of real estate. The three nations approximated a geographic ring around almost all the Arab world; thus, Israel named the strategy the *Torat HaPeripheria*, or "Periphery Doctrine."

For his part, the Shah recognized that a pan-Arab alliance would interfere with his designs on extending Iran's regional influence and power. Having consolidated his authority following the CIA's engineering of his return to the throne, the Shah sought to pursue an aggressive foreign policy that would enhance Iran's stature.²¹³ Since Nasser's maneuvering encroached on the Shah's ability to reach out to Arab leaders, the Shah sought other opportunities. Israel's alliance with the United States and the West presented one possibility.

Initially, Iran, unlike Israel, did not consider the Arab states a significant military threat. Rather, Arab unification threatened the Shah's self-image and his cultivated position within the Islamic world. In his vision, he would reign over a new Persian Empire, building his image upon the prominence of Iran's Shia clerical tradition. Pan-Arabism elevated the significance of ethnic ties over those of religion, and thus interfered with the Shah's plans to influence Shia-majority countries. Worse, an alliance based upon ethnicity threatened to isolate Iran in the Middle East. The Shah needed both allies and a plan to reverse this trend. His concern deepened in 1958 when the Iraqi military overthrew the Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq, Iran's immediate neighbor and historic rival. The new ruling junta, which included future Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, quickly entered into a series of agreements with the Soviet Union. This brought the tide of Soviet expansionism to Iran's doorstep.

²¹³ Sobhani, *The Pragmatic Entente: Israeli-Iranian Relations, 1948-1988*, 23.

Israel's proposal for the Periphery Alliance thus arrived at a propitious moment for the Shah. Although the Iranian monarch had little interest in ensuring Israel's survival, the arrangement provided him with support for countering the Soviet threat. As Ramazani put it, the Shah's decision was a "conscious and deliberate policy [to] remain aloof from the quagmire and age-old conflict between the Arabs and the Israelis and to maintain a balancing posture between the two sides while pursuing Iran's larger foreign policy objectives."²¹⁴

ii. Operational Cooperation

For Israel, the Periphery Alliance represented a limited partnership for cooperative security and intelligence purposes, the efficacy of which depended on secrecy. Thus, Israel charged its foreign intelligence service, the Mossad, with coordinating and implementing the new doctrine.

Secrecy was vital to both countries as neither leader wanted the clergy, politicians, or public to object. Israelis would be suspicious of Iran's motives and trustworthiness given that Iran continued to maintain active diplomatic relations with Arab countries that vowed Israel's destruction. Both Israeli leaders and the Shah recognized the risk to the latter of public revelation of their cooperation.²¹⁵ The Shah ruled a predominantly Muslim society guided by a clergy whose rhetoric was fiercely anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic. The clergy would not countenance political considerations superseding religious faith. Moreover, the Shah owed a political debt to the principal clerical antagonist of Israel, Ayatollah Abol-Ghasem Kashani. In 1952, Kashani had publicly defected from supporting Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh thus helping

²¹⁴ Ramazani, 'Iran and the Arab-Israeli Conflict', 413.

²¹⁵ There is plenty of precedent for this in Israeli history. Most successful efforts at coordination with Muslim countries had to occur under strict secrecy, lest public pressure force parties to withdraw their efforts.

to bolster public support for the Shah's restoration to the throne.²¹⁶ Earlier, in January 1984, Kashani had issued a communiqué calling for jihad against Israel. This call would be repeated by Kashani's followers for years to come, including the future founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.²¹⁷

Although motivated by a strategy to enhance his regional standing, the Shah also recognized that public revelation would not only damage his leadership aspiration but also risk his condemnation as a traitor to Islam. Even as he sought to benefit from the relationship, he needed to project an image of a ruler committed both to the Iranian nation and to the Islamic world. Thus, the Shah continued his public rhetoric condemning Israel while privately seeking to benefit from cooperation.

With the Shah having much to lose and Israel having much to gain, not surprisingly they saw the secret relationship differently. For the Shah, it was a convenient arrangement. While the alliance belied his "calculated ambivalence," according to Alpher, the Shah displayed a notable "lack of emotional attachment" to the Israelis. By contrast, Israel's leaders imbued the relationship with biblical significance. They saw it as the continuation of the legacy of Cyrus the Great's liberation, which had enabled them to return to the land that was now their independent nation. The Periphery Alliance was more than a strategic security-enhancing arrangement, it was a "fulfillment of destiny," a modern addendum to the biblical narrative.²¹⁸

Despite different perspectives, Iran and Israel agreed on the purpose. Initially, they sought to share intelligence by convening meetings of a "Trident" group, which also included Turkey. Each country's Intelligence officials got to know one another as they met regularly every six months. Through these interactions, Iran and Israel identified

²¹⁶ Sobhani, *The Pragmatic Entente: Israeli-Iranian Relations, 1948-1988*, 12.

²¹⁷ Behrouz Souresrafil, *Khomeini and Israel* (I Researchers Incorporated, 1988), 19.

²¹⁸ Alpher, *Periphery*.

avenues of assistance beyond information exchange. The Shah, having been impressed by the Israeli intelligence apparatus, requested assistance from the Mossad in developing his own domestic intelligence service. Israel helped train the members of SAVAK, the Shah's secret police force, which spied on and terrified his subjects.²¹⁹ As oil prices rose, increasing Iran's financial resources, the Shah went on a spending spree for military equipment, much of which he purchased from Israeli weapons manufacturers. Weapons sales accounted for a large segment of the Israeli economy.²²⁰ Eventually, in the mid-1970s the relationship expanded to include military personnel exchanges.²²¹ The Iranian military, impressed by Israel's success in fighting Arab armies, sought to observe the Israeli Defense Force's operation and learn from its experience.²²² The Iranian officers had reason to anticipate the possibility of a military conflict between Iran and Arab forces. The Iranians paid Israel for the consulting and training services, and the personal interaction gradually reduced Israel's suspicions of Iranians. As Uzi Arad, a former national security advisor and Mossad official, explained it, "We started to identify with their struggles."²²³

Officials in each country also recognized that the benefits could expand beyond the military and intelligence sectors. Israel lacked energy resources to fuel the industrial

²¹⁹ Originally, this began as a joint training operation with both the Israeli Mossad and the CIA, but according to Sobhani, SAVAK officers grew disappointed with the quality of training from the CIA and requested that the Shah allow them to increase training with the Mossad instead. Sobhani, *The Pragmatic Entente: Israeli-Iranian Relations, 1948-1988*, 28.

²²⁰ Mansour Farhang, 'The Iran-Israel Connection', *Arab Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (1 January 1989): 87.

²²¹ For many Iranian military officials, participation these exchanges would come back to haunt them after the 1979 Islamic Revolution as past contact with Israelis provided justification for their dismissal and possibly imprisonment or execution.

²²² Documents retrieved from the United States embassy following the 1979 revolution show that Israel and Iran cooperated on Project Flower, a joint missile development program. Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Georgetown University Press, 2014).

²²³ Alpher, *Periphery*.

development promised by the influx of human capital in the form of Jewish immigrants from the Diaspora. While the Arab oil-producing countries refused to sell oil to Israel because they opposed its existence, Iran, having been excluded from the pan-Arab movement, had no such constraints. The Shah could realize the revenue from the Israeli market and, of equal importance, access Israeli technical expertise for modernizing his economy and Westernizing Iranian society.

Modernization was an imperative for the Shah. By the early 1960s, thousands of young people of the post-war generation, who had spent time traveling, studying, and living abroad, began to assert themselves in Iranian politics. They demanded liberalization and transformative changes.²²⁴ In response, the Shah had launched what he called the “White Revolution,” which initially centered on land reforms. Eventually, the initiative expanded to encompass a broad array of economic and social measures, including industrial privatization, infrastructure development, and the right of women to vote.²²⁵ Among the international advisors consulted by the Shah were many Israelis. As an admirer of Israel’s rapid development, particularly in the agricultural sector, the Shah sought Israeli guidance in advancing Iran’s farming industry and national infrastructure projects. Israelis assisted in developing a variety of high-profile projects, ranging from construction of the Darius Khabir Dam in Shiraz, to a naval base along the Persian Gulf coast, to luxury apartment complexes in downtown Tehran.²²⁶ The Shah reportedly expressed his admiration to Uri Lubrani, the top Israeli diplomatic official in Iran, by

²²⁴ Ali M. Ansari, ‘The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah, “Modernization” and the Consolidation of Power’, *Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2001): 4.

²²⁵ James A. Bill, ‘Modernization and Reform From Above: The Case of Iran’, *The Journal of Politics* 32, no. 1 (1970): 31–32, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2128863>.

²²⁶ Neta Feniger and Rachel Kallus, ‘Israeli Planning in the Shah’s Iran: A Forgotten Episode’, *Planning Perspectives* 30, no. 2 (April 2015): 231, 245, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2014.933677>.

telling him, "Israel is a country that has the developed technology we need. Its know-how is complementary to ours."²²⁷ The Israeli contributions inspired many Iranians to visit Israel to see its progress and learn its methods. Iranian farmers and engineers traveled to receive training, while businessmen sought to establish ties with Israeli firms.²²⁸

As Israelis developed a new understanding of Iranians, so too did those in Iran with knowledge of the alliance come to appreciate the Israelis. Former Iranian Prime Minister Ali Amini characterized the still-secret relationship as being "like the true love that exists between two people out of wedlock."²²⁹ Although the circle of knowledgeable people grew as interaction expanded, everyone sharing in the benefits, both government officials and private entrepreneurs, had an incentive to refrain from informing the general public. When the exchanges necessitated increased consular services, the operation was disguised. The Israeli embassy in Tehran did not fly the Israeli flag or display perceptible identifying insignia.

An exception to the secrecy occurred in 1962 when Israel openly responded with assistance after Iran experienced a severe earthquake. Israel sent a team of experts to assist with recovery and reconstruction in the Qazvin region of northwest Iran. Israel used the event to demonstrate to the world the proficiency of its technical expertise, of which Iranian officials were already aware. The Shah could use the opportunity to combine the overt and covert Israeli assistance for advancing his plans to modernize the

²²⁷ Sobhani, *The Pragmatic Entente: Israeli-Iranian Relations, 1948-1988*, 115.

²²⁸ Howard A. Patten, *Israel and the Cold War: Diplomacy, Strategy and the Policy of the Periphery at the United Nations* (I.B.Tauris, 2013), 52.

²²⁹ Sobhani, *The Pragmatic Entente: Israeli-Iranian Relations, 1948-1988*, 42.

country by upgrading infrastructure, introducing advanced technology, and reforming the Iranian economy.²³⁰

Despite the strategic and economic benefits each country was realizing, all was not copacetic. Beginning in the early 1970s, Israelis working in Iran witnessed public expressions of dissatisfaction with the Shah's regime. As demonstrations against the Shah's rule intensified, Israelis realized that the civil unrest could eventually force the Shah from power. They began planning for a post-Shah Iran by instructing individuals and companies conducting business there to protect themselves from future political instability. They recommended that Israelis with economic interests in Iran try to divest those holdings. At a minimum, they suggested maintaining a negative balance of payments with Iran, so that money owed to Iranian concerns would be greater than the amount owed to Israel.²³¹

D. The Shah's Retreat

While the Shah and Israeli leaders were pursuing a mutually beneficial secret relationship, Gamal Nasser continued his pro-Arab saber rattling against Israel. Throughout the 1960s, his inflammatory anti-Israel public statements included warnings of impending war.²³² In May 1967, reports of an Egyptian military buildup in the Sinai Peninsula reached Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, causing the Israeli military to

²³⁰ Neta Feniger and Rachel Kallus, 'Expertise in the Name of Diplomacy: The Israeli Plan for Rebuilding the Qazvin Region, Iran', *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 5, no. 1 (1 March 2016): 103–34.

²³¹ Alpher, *Periphery*.

²³² The origins of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War remain debatable, Egyptian intentions for Israeli invasion and Soviet influence. It is uncontested that Nasser publicly promised to eliminate Israel over the decade preceding the war. He also alluded to the need for war to prevent Israel's nuclear weapons program. Howard M. Sachar, *A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2013), 615; Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, 'The Spymaster, the Communist, and Foxbats over Dimona: The USSR's Motive for Instigating the Six-Day War', *Israel Studies* 11, no. 2 (2006): 88–130.

mobilize in preparation for a potential conflict. On June 5, 1967, the Israeli military launched a preemptive attack that routed the Arab forces. Within the first hours, Israeli bombs destroyed nearly the entire Egyptian air force, hitting their planes on the runway. In the ground war, the Arab militaries, and especially that of Nasser's Egyptian force, proved inept. Throughout the conflict, Nasser, who had surrounded himself with sycophants and yes-men, appeared to be unaware of the dire situation confronting his troops and the futility of Egypt's military operations. The humiliating defeat tainted his credibility on strategic matters among Arab leaders and weakened his claim to leadership of the Arab world. For the moment, the pan-Arab threat eased.

Given his aspirations as well as his alliance with Israel, the Shah undoubtedly was pleased with the outcome of the war. Nasser resigned as President of Egypt, which curtailed the strategic influence of the Soviet Union. The Shah thus had more latitude to pursue his domestic and foreign agendas. His optimism did not last long. The Egyptian people reportedly demanded Nasser's reinstatement as President of Egypt. Although Nasser died of a heart attack three years later, his successor, Anwar Sadat, continued the cause of reversing the 1967 losses. Moreover, the Soviets redoubled their efforts to resupply and rearm the Arab forces.

In 1973, Sadat joined with Syria in launching a surprise attack against the Israeli-captured territory on the Sinai Peninsula. Initiated on the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year for Jews, the invading Arab army caused Israel to cede some of the territory it held. The conflict was now as much a regional action as a face-off between the Cold War superpowers, with the Soviets backing the Arabs and the United States supporting Israel. Thus, with a critical resupply from the United States, Israel

regrouped and counterattacked.²³³ Although the Soviet Union entreated Sadat to accept a ceasefire, he refused in the mistaken belief that he had the capability to defeat Israel. Eventually, hostilities ended; neither side could objectively claim a convincing victory, but neither had they provoked a larger confrontation.

Although the Shah could not appear to be pleased with the outcome, he believed himself in a stronger position than after the first conflict. He had been busy in the intervening six years between the two wars. He had clamped down on domestic dissent using his powerful state security apparatus. He had also received considerable American military aid such that he possessed one of the most powerful militaries in the region.²³⁴ Following Nasser's death and the subsequent dissolution of the pan-Arabism movement, he saw an opportunity to fill the power void in regional leadership.

During the war, the Shah had sought to profit by playing both sides while remaining officially neutral. He reasoned that an extended conflict with no decisive victor would be most beneficial to Iranian interests. Publicly, he signaled favoritism to the Arab cause by sending medical supplies to its armies, providing pilots to Saudi Arabia for training purposes and allowing the Soviet air force to use Iranian airspace to ferry

²³³ The extent to which Cold War concerns motivated American officials is difficult to overstate. President Richard Nixon, uncertain of whether to authorize a massive military resupply to the Israelis in the early stages of the conflict, was ultimately convinced of the need to do so under the premise that a U.S.-armed force in Israel could not be seen to lose to a Soviet-supplied Arab force. Levey, 'Anatomy of an Airlift', 481.

²³⁴ The Kennedy administration had restricted the Shah's weapons purchases under the "Twitchell Doctrine," which limited Iran's weapons purchases based on a survey of its needs and capabilities. These restrictions were loosened under Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson, before being removed altogether during the Nixon administration. Gholam Reza Afkhami, *The Life and Times of the Shah* (University of California Press, 2009), 295–305.

supplies to the Arab forces.²³⁵ At the same time, he assisted the United States efforts to funnel weapons to the Israelis, including small arms and heavy mortars.²³⁶

To the Israelis, this duplicity was a betrayal. His defiance of the Arab oil embargo or his assistance of the United States' weapons supply to Israel meant little if the Shah was also supplying oil to the Arab armies. The Shah, who had been the beneficiary of Israeli knowledge and expertise for over a decade, had abandoned them in their moment of need by assisting their enemies. At best, the Shah was a war profiteer. At worst, he was selling out Israel to enhance his claim to regional leadership. To assume his coveted role as a regional power broker, the Shah appeared willing to abandon the alliance.²³⁷ Years later, a former Iranian ambassador summed up the country's position, "We didn't have Israel as a friend to have the Arabs as enemies."²³⁸ Unlike the Israelis, the Shah had never embraced the idea of a shared Jewish-Persian heritage. Rather, the 1973 war demonstrated that the alliance was an expendable expediency dependent upon fluctuating geopolitics.

In March 1975, eighteen months after the end of the war, the Shah publicly revealed his intentions when he suddenly announced Iran's willingness to engage in diplomatic talks with Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. The two countries were not friends. They had a long-running territorial dispute between the Shatt Al Arab and Khuzestan, which the Shah feared might become a justification for an Iraqi invasion of Iran. More importantly, Iran and Israel had been supporting an ongoing Kurdish rebellion in

²³⁵ To Israel's consternation, the Shah refused to risk exposing the relationship. Thus, he refused to allow Iran to be a transfer point in ferrying Jewish volunteers from Australia to join the Israeli military. By contrast, he permitted the Soviets to use Iranian territory for resupply. Ramazani, 'Iran and the Arab-Israeli Conflict', 418–19.

²³⁶ Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States* (Yale University Press, 2007), 48.

²³⁷ Ramazani, 'Iran and the Arab-Israeli Conflict', 419.

²³⁸ Quote cited but source not named in Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*, 48.

southern Iraq to destabilize Saddam's regime. The effort was particularly imperative for Israel, which had used the rebellion to connect its operatives seeking to extract Iraqi Jews facing increased danger from Saddam.²³⁹

The Shah again sold out Israeli interests when, in December 1975, he and Saddam signed the Algiers Accord resolving their territorial dispute and ending Iranian support of the Kurdish rebellion.²⁴⁰ This was a betrayal of Israel since the country was in no position to assist the Kurds on their own. On behalf of his alarmed nation, the Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin flew to Iran to seek a personal explanation from the Shah.²⁴¹ Iran's reasons had merit: If the Shah wanted to avoid what he believed would be an inevitable war with Iraq, he had to improve relations with his neighbor. To resolve their territorial disputes, he had to stop supporting regime opponents. The strategy was not without risk, which included losing the benefits of his alliance with Israel. The Shah effectively chose to announce his priorities by never consulting Israel before deciding to court Iraq. Eliezer Tsafir, the head of the Mossad in Iran, described the Shah's abandonment of the Kurds and the Israelis in favor of Saddam Hussein as akin to that of Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler.²⁴²

From the Shah's perspective at that moment, the potential benefits appeared to outweigh the risks. He saw himself as domestically and regionally secure, and thus in a position to pursue his larger ambitions. Not only did he have military might, he was expanding Iran's nuclear program. Two and a half years earlier, Iran had issued its fifth five-year national development plan, in which it called for the construction of several nuclear power stations, including one on the naval base at Bandar Abbas. The Shah

²³⁹ Parsi, 54.

²⁴⁰ As noted later in this chapter, Saddam subsequently maintained the agreement terms were unfair and invoke it as justification for his 1980 invasion of Iran.

²⁴¹ Sobhani, *The Pragmatic Entente: Israeli-Iranian Relations, 1948-1988*, 108.

²⁴² Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*, 57.

hinted that the production of nuclear power might contribute to the eventual development of nuclear weapons in Iran.²⁴³ Without Arab intimidation or the threat of Soviet-inspired mischief, and with military and potential nuclear capability, the Shah believed he had little to lose by abandoning his relationship with the Israelis.

He evinced his new bravado in a 1975 interview with Egyptian journalist Mohammad Hasanein Haykal. The Shah answered a wide range of questions on numerous topics relating to Iran's foreign policy, including, for the first time, responding directly to questions about Iran's relationship with Israel. He justified sharing military and intelligence information with Israel as a strategic necessity for balancing the threat of Arab aggression led by Nasser. He then added, "Now the situation has changed,"²⁴⁴ implying that without Nasser's destructive influence threatening the stability of the

²⁴³ This is a disputed point. The Shah allegedly asserted in a 1974 interview with the French magazine *Les Informations* that Iran would develop nuclear weapons "without a doubt...sooner than one would think," if conditions in the Middle East made it necessary. The quote was republished in an article in *The Christian Science Monitor*, which ran with a disclaimer issued by the Iranian Embassy in Paris that said this was "information invented out of whole cloth without any foundation," adding that the Shah "never made any statement that could be interpreted in this way." Interestingly, the Shah was in France to visit the French National Nuclear Research Center at Sarclay, which had also been involved in helping establish Israel's secret nuclear program in Dimona in 1955. Other sources suggest that the Shah had nuclear ambitions. A 2003 article in *Dawn* alleged that Iran discussed plans with Israel to adapt surface-to-surface missiles with nuclear warheads. In a 2003 interview in *Le Figaro*, Akbar Etemad, the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization under the Shah, claimed that the Shah tasked him with creating a special team to track the latest nuclear research so that Iran would be ready to build a bomb when needed. As a signatory to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons, Iran had pledged not to use its nuclear capacity for military purposes, although by the mid-1970s, it had not concluded a safeguards agreement with the IAEA to verify this. John K. Cooley, 'More Fingers on Nuclear Trigger?', *Christian Science Monitor*, 25 June 1974; Zetter, *Countdown to Zero Day*.

²⁴⁴ The article is cited in several sources, including Parsi, Alpher, and a scholarly article on India-Iran relations by Mehrunnisa Ali. Alpher cites *Kayhan International*, September 16, 1975 as the source of this information. Ali's citation lists the publication from a newspaper or periodical called *The Sun* (most likely the Pakistani paper). Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*; Alpher, *Periphery*; Mehrunnisa Ali, 'The Changing Pattern of India-Iran Relations', *Pakistan Horizon* 28, no. 4 (1975): 53-66; 'Iran's Strategic Intentions and Capabilities' (Institute for National Strategic Studies - National Defense University: DIANE Publishing, April 1994).

region, Iran could reengage with its Arab neighbors based on their common religion. There was even speculation about the formation of a new regional pact in which Iran joined with Egypt and Algeria.²⁴⁵ By ending its ties with Israel and seeking an accord with Iraq, the Shah led Iran from its isolation, and cast himself as a powerful arbiter of stability and balance in a region that had little of either.

IV. The Islamic Republic and Israel

A. On the Eve of Revolution

i. Iran

The Shah's preoccupation with his international reputation either obscured or lulled him into complacency about potential domestic threats, notably the challenge posed by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Khomeini's antagonism dated from 1953 when the CIA-backed coup d'état re-installed the Shah as the ruler of Iran. Breaking with the tradition of clerical quietism, Khomeini became an outspoken and fiery opponent of the Shah and his policies of Westernization and imperialism. He was particularly incensed by what he believed was a subversive Western infiltration of Iran's Islamic culture.

The Islam preached by Khomeini included anti-Zionist rhetoric, which implied a departure from the general tolerance accorded to Jews by Iran's population.²⁴⁶ Iran's traditional merchant class, known as the *bazaris*, had opposed creation of a Jewish homeland in the region. They had invoked anti-Jewish stereotypes out of fear that a

²⁴⁵ A declassified 1975 CIA report cites an Iranian alliance with the more "moderate" Arab regimes as a possible outcome of Iraq continuing its anti-Iranian foreign policy following their agreement. 'The Implications of the Iran-Iraq Agreement' (Central Intelligence Agency, 1 May 1975), <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R01142A000500050002-7.pdf>.

²⁴⁶ Among his spiritual mentors was Ayatollah Kashani, mentioned earlier, who in 1948 had been among the leading clerical figures opposing the creation of Israel.

Jewish nation might challenge Iran's economic power.²⁴⁷ As strong supporters of the clerics, each may have inspired the other's anti-Israel sentiments.

Khomeini used anti-Zionist messages as rhetorical devices for denouncing the Shah. Exiled for his repeated anti-Shah agitations, Khomeini cited the Shah's lack of opposition to Israel – and later, his cooperation with the country – to cast him as an ineffective and un-Islamic leader, subservient to Western and Jewish interests.

Khomeini's narrative conjuring up the image of a mythical Israeli-Baha'i fifth column operating in Iran fomented fear among Iranians. Shiite clerics had long disdained the Baha'i religion, a nineteenth century offshoot of Shia Islam, which they considered a heretical faith.²⁴⁸ In a 1963 communiqué, Khomeini conflated the threat from Baha'is and Jews: "I must warn all the Moslems of the world and the nation of Iran that the Koran and Islam are in danger, and the independence of the country and its economy have fallen into the hands of the Zionists in the form of the Baha'i party. It would not take too long for them to take over the entire country and rapidly impoverish the Muslim people. Iranian television is the spy center of the Jews."²⁴⁹

Khomeini's narrative also saw the Shah's ties to America and America's support of Israel as part of an external plot against Iran. According to his account, the creation of a Jewish State in the Middle East was part of a larger American plot to partition the Islamic world. Khomeini had lots of history to work with in crafting his charges. With the Shah's popularity diminishing, the reminder of the 1953 CIA-backed coup cast America

²⁴⁷ Souresrafil, *Khomeini and Israel*, 17.

²⁴⁸ Shiite leaders cited the location of Bahai centers and the founder's burial site in Israel as evidence of collusion between the two religions, which merited Muslim hatred. In 1962, prominent Tehran cleric Falsafi claimed that the basis of clerical opposition to the Shah was due to "the real threat" that Jews intended to "make another Palestine in Iran and suffocate all the Moslems in this country and bring all the dirty elements of Bahaiism to power." Souresrafil, 23–24.

²⁴⁹ Souresrafil, 24.

as an enemy. Moreover, in Khomeini's telling, the 1975 disclosure of the ties between Iran and Israel returned to haunt the Shah. Khomeini accused Israel of founding and training SAVAK, the Shah's hated and feared secret police, who were engaged in spying on, imprisoning, and torturing Iranians who opposed the Shah.²⁵⁰ In an interview on the eve of the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini told the French newspaper *Le Monde* that the Shah's alliance with Israel made him guilty of crimes against Islam.²⁵¹

ii. Israel

The Israelis were less complacent than the Shah about threats to his regime. Israeli Foreign Ministry documents from the early years of the alliance reveal concern about Khomeini's emergence as a potentially powerful opponent of the Shah. A 1962 telegram from Israeli officials in Iran noted that Khomeini's attacks against the Shah's reforms frequently claimed that they allowed Zionist infiltration.²⁵² A year later, Israeli authorities again expressed alarm when Khomeini led a public protest calling for Israel's destruction during the Shia holiday of Ashura.²⁵³ After the Shah exiled Khomeini in 1964 and ties between Israel and Iran grew stronger, the cleric disappeared from Israeli radar. For more than a decade Israel stopped reporting on Khomeini's whereabouts and activities. He did not reemerge as a prominent opposition leader in exile until shortly before the 1979 revolution.

²⁵⁰ Israeli participation in training the SAVAK helped add legitimacy to the conspiracy theory pushed by Khomeini. Ronen A. Cohen, 'Iran, Israel, and Zionism since the Islamic Revolution - From Rational Relations to Threat and Disaster' (Netanya Academic College, 2008), http://www.academia.edu/659583/Iran_Israel_and_Zionism_since_the_Islamic_Revolution_-_From_Rational_Relations_to_Threat_and_Disaster.

²⁵¹ Cohen, 39–40.

²⁵² '22 November 1962, Israel State Archives.

²⁵³ Netaniel Lorch, 'המנהל בפועל של מחלקת מזרח תיכון במשרד החוץ', תזכיר מנתנאל לורך, 9 בירושלים, June 1963, Israel State Archives.

Even without taking note of Khomeini, Israel's pessimism about the Shah's reliability and his future continued to increase. In addition to his support for the Arabs in the 1973 war and his 1975 accord with Saddam Hussein, Israeli officials noted the popular dissatisfaction with his authoritarian rule. Khomeini's reemergence in official Israeli documents coincided with reports of the Shah's deteriorating physical and mental health.²⁵⁴ The top Israeli diplomat in Iran, Uri Lubrani, wrote in a report to the Foreign Ministry that, "[The Shah] is not the same man that we once knew, remote, sometimes astray. There's no doubt that the man is undergoing a nightmare...and what's most worrying is the feeling that he is resigned to his fate."²⁵⁵

As popular protests against the Shah reached a fever pitch in December 1978, Israelis in Iran went into full lockdown. They feared for their safety as Khomeini's rhetoric fostered intense anti-Israeli sentiment. One senior foreign ministry official described the dire state of relations, writing, "The extreme religious leader Khomeini's remarks in regards to [sic] the Israeli issue have turned scathing as of late. His view that Israeli soldiers are helping the Shah is well known, and that Israelis are coming to Iran to replace the striking oil industry workers, and therefore their blood is permissible [to shed]."²⁵⁶ Israelis scrambled to plan for the evacuation of their facilities in Iran and the exfiltration of their nationals.

²⁵⁴ The Shah had been diagnosed with a terminal form of cancer. This had not been widely publicized. It is unlikely that the Israelis were aware of the severity of his medical condition.

²⁵⁵ Uri Lubrani, '28 משה דיין, החוץ, מברק משגריר ישראל בטהראן, אורי לוברני אל שר החוץ, 28, 28 September 1978, Israel State Archives.

²⁵⁶ Ezrael Karni, '14 המזרח התיכון ואגן הים התיכון, מברק מהיועץ עזריאל קרני בטהראן אל המחלקה למזרח התיכון ואגן הים התיכון, 14, 14 December 1978, Israel State Archives.

B. Becoming Enemies

Unquestionably, the Islamic Revolution marked a fundamental change in Iranian-Israeli relations, although at the time, many questions remained. While Khomeini's rhetoric signaled an abrupt end to formal ties, officials had no clear picture of Khomeini's intentions. His avowed support for the Palestinians could translate into military action,²⁵⁷ or he might realize some need for covert contacts with Israel. In the immediate aftermath, it was even unclear whether Khomeini and his religious fundamentalist supporters could form a stable government. Whatever the future reality, Iran publicly considered Israel an enemy.

Israelis also viewed an Iran ruled by Islamic fundamentalists as an enemy. To most Israelis, who had little knowledge of pre-revolutionary Iran or familiarity with the secret alliance, the consequential change for Israel was the new regime's militant support of the Palestinian cause. The absence of historical perspective undermined Israel's predictive capacity.²⁵⁸ Israeli leaders and analysts had considerable leeway in interpreting events and ascribing motives to Iranian leaders. They offered different narratives. One version held that the Revolution revealed the "true" Iranian identity: Islamists driven by hatred of Jews and Israel. Others maintained that it was too early to form expectations. The initial narrative had important implications for interpreting subsequent Iranian actions. For example, some would later assert that Iran's nuclear

²⁵⁷ Arafat was the first major foreign dignitary to visit Iran in the aftermath of the Revolution. Khomeini said in a speech, "Iran's revolution would be incomplete until the Palestinians won theirs." Farhad Kazemi, 'Iran, Israel and the Arab Israeli Balance', in *Iran Since the Revolution*, ed. Barry Rosen, 1st ed. (Boulder : New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 90.

²⁵⁸ It would take at least a decade for most Israeli leaders to decide – and state publicly – that Iran was an irredeemable foe.

development program was an inevitable extension of the fervor unleashed by the Islamic Revolution.²⁵⁹

In fact, far from creating solidarity, the Revolution initiated considerable turmoil in Iran and disrupted relationships with other countries. Not surprisingly, the revolutionary coalition that had ousted the Shah quickly fell apart, and rival political factions vied for power. As they debated the provisions and ratification of a new constitution, they fought over the structure of the government and the power of the clerics.²⁶⁰ Eventually, Khomeini and his religious allies gained the upper hand and moved to consolidate control over the most powerful political institutions. They also hastily convened revolutionary courts and paraded their political opponents through show trials.²⁶¹ By executing or imprisoning officials from the Shah's reign, they purged their political enemies from their new government and from the country.

The chaos left in limbo the fate of the Jews who had resisted Israeli entreaties to flee and American offers of assistance. While many left, those remaining hoped that Khomeini might temper his conspiracy accusations directed at Iranian Jews as distinguished from Israelis.²⁶² When he secured his leadership, however, Khomeini did not abandon his attacks on Iranian Jews. Revolutionary authorities arrested several

²⁵⁹ This opinion was expressed to the author several times during fieldwork conversations with experts and former officials in Israel; in print, it is expressed most clearly in the introduction to Katz and Hendel's 2012 analysis of the Iranian-Israeli conflict. Yaakov Katz and Yoaz Hendel, *Israel vs. Iran: The Shadow War*, First Edition (Washington, D.C: Potomac Books Inc., 2012), 9.

²⁶⁰ The debates are described in Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini* (Cambridge ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

²⁶¹ Sadegh Zibakalam, 'To Rule, or Not to Rule? An Alternative Look at the Political Life of Ayatollah Khomeini Between 1960 and 1980', in *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*, ed. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

²⁶² As noted at the beginning of this chapter, precise statistics on the number of Jews in Iran, both pre- and post-Revolution, are difficult to find. Most estimates put the pre-Revolution number close to 100,000, while the post-Revolution number is frequently listed as somewhere between 10,000-25,000, although occasionally with larger or smaller estimates.

Jewish leaders during their initial purges. The most infamous case involved Habib Elghanian, who was sentenced to death in 1979 for “treason by maintaining a connection with Israel and Zionism.”²⁶³ Israel issued only a terse statement of condemnation. It sounded both nostalgic and a bit hopeful in stating “there has never been a conflict of interest between the State of Israel and Iran, irrespective of the regime in various periods.”²⁶⁴ Remarkably, despite some notable exceptions, Khomeini moved to assure Iran’s Jews that he would not harm them based upon their religion. He indicated that he did not wish to interfere with the community’s practice of Judaism.²⁶⁵

Ironically, the Islamic Revolution occurred two years after Israelis had elected the first non-Labor government in its history. The victory of the right-wing Likud party not only represented a dramatic political change, it brought to power a former terrorist when Menachem Begin became Prime Minister. Begin, who had been a member of the underground Irgun movement that fought the British and Palestinians to secure Israel’s independence, was considerably more hawkish than his predecessors. He believed that military conflict with Israel’s neighbors was the inevitable result of centuries of tension between Muslims and Jews. This made him less inclined to negotiate with the Palestinians and skeptical about peace initiatives with the surrounding Arab states.²⁶⁶ Begin was thus unwilling to give the new Islamic Republic the benefit of the doubt

²⁶³ Israel’s Foreign Relations: 1979-1980 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1976), 19, available online at <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/MFADocuments/Yearbook4/Pages/INTRODUCTIO N.aspx>.

²⁶⁴ *Israel’s Foreign Relations*, 19.

²⁶⁵ Roya Hakakian, ‘How Iran Kept Its Jews’, *Tablet*, 30 December 2014, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/187519/how-iran-kept-its-jews>.

²⁶⁶ It is ironic that Begin was the first Israeli prime minister to win the Nobel Peace Prize for reaching a comprehensive peace agreement with Egypt’s Anwar Sadat at Camp David, given that he was a reluctant and often intransigent negotiator. He received the prize together with Sadat and American President Jimmy Carter. Lawrence Wright, *Thirteen Days in September: The Dramatic Story of the Struggle for Peace* (New York: Vintage, 2015).

regarding its intentions. When Khomeini, in his initial diplomatic act, offered the vacated Israeli embassy building in Iran to the Palestine Liberation Organization, Begin was not shy in his critique. Acknowledging the provocation, he called the offer an “alliance between two phenomena of blind, deep hate,” and urged Israelis to “grasp and appreciate what it is we face, what kind of enemy we confront.”²⁶⁷ He took to referring to the revolutionaries as “Khomeini’s mob,” even using the epithet in a toast at an April 1980 White House dinner hosted by President Jimmy Carter.²⁶⁸

Begin’s toast that evening was more than a critique of the Iranians; it was an implicit criticism of what he considered the United States’ passivity to Iran’s holding American citizens as hostages. After the United States admitted the deposed Shah for medical treatment at an American hospital, Iranian students stormed the embassy, taking the remaining staff as hostages. In his toast offered five months into the crisis, Begin noted that the United States, unlike Russia, was trying “every avenue, accepting patience and pain” to free the hostages. Later, in an interview with ABC television, Begin elaborated on his disapproval by imagining what would be a preferable Russian response. He opined, “They would have marched on Tehran and captured it.” He claimed that the military intervention would succeed “because the Khomeini army is no match to any other army at all. It’s a mob, an armed mob, but still a mob.” To avoid any misinterpretation, Begin then mocked the United States, “As for Iran – the Americans

²⁶⁷ ‘Statement in the Knesset by Prime Minister Begin on His Talks with President Sadat’, 16 January 1980, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/MFADocuments/Yearbook4/Pages/61%20Statement%20in%20the%20Knesset%20by%20Prime%20Minister%20Begin.aspx>.

²⁶⁸ This statement came at an especially tense moment for the Carter administration: the Iranians were holding American hostages having stormed the American Embassy in Tehran in November 1979. ‘Exchange of Toasts by President Carter and Prime Minister Begin at the White House’, 15 April 1980, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/MFADocuments/Yearbook4/Pages/81%20Exchange%20of%20toasts%20by%20President%20Carter%20and%20Prim.aspx>.

are humiliated. This great nation, with all the massive power at its disposal, feels itself to be humiliated and does not know what to do.”²⁶⁹

Israeli officials, taking their cue from Begin, continued to direct an aggressive war of words war at Iran even as Khomeini secured his grip on power. Notably, the speakers often directed personal insults at the Iranians as if engaged in a playground dare against former friends. For example, Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, who would two decades later become Israel’s Prime Minister, told the *Wall Street Journal* in 1982 that Iran’s approach to warfare was “naïve,” and he spoke of Iranians as “all these Mongols riding horses.”²⁷⁰ Two years later, Sharon’s successor as Defense Minister, Moshe Arens, labeled Iran as one of the Middle East’s four “mad” regimes,” the others being Libya, Syria, and Iraq.²⁷¹ As the American hostage crisis dragged on, however, some Israeli officials expressed sympathy for the United States. In a January 1981 speech to the World Jewish Congress, Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir took a more understanding approach by noting that “Israelis understood the pain and fear of hostages being held by inhuman beings.”²⁷²

²⁶⁹ ‘Interview with Prime Minister Begin on ABC Television’, 20 April 1980, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents,

<http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/MFADocuments/Yearbook4/Pages/82%20Interview%20with%20Prime%20Minister%20Begin%20on%20ABC%20Tele.aspx>.

²⁷⁰ ‘Interview with Defense Minister Sharon in the Wall Street Journal’, 28 May 1982, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents,

<http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/MFADocuments/Yearbook5/Pages/131%20Interview%20with%20Defense%20Minister%20Sharon%20in%20the.aspx>.

²⁷¹ ‘Statement in Knesset by Defense Minister Moshe Arens’, 14 November 1984, Volume 8, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents.

²⁷² ‘Address by Foreign Minister Shamir to the World Jewish Congress’, 21 January 1981, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/MFADocuments/Yearbook5/Pages/2%20Address%20by%20Foreign%20Minister%20Shamir%20to%20the%20World.aspx>.

C. The Enemy of My Enemy May (Not) Be My Friend

On September 22, 1980, Iraq invaded Iran. In a serious miscalculation, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein believed that the leadership struggle in the new Islamic Republic rendered Iran vulnerable to Iraqi expansionism.²⁷³ Rather than securing a quick victory, Saddam's troops met fierce Iranian opposition. For a second time, Iranians rallied around Khomeini as their leader and repelled the Iraqi invasion.

Next it was Khomeini's turn for miscalculation. Sensing strength and momentum and employing his charisma, Khomeini crafted a historical narrative justifying an invasion of Iraq. His counterattack initiated an eight-year struggle that cost nearly a million lives and ended in a stalemate.

For Israel, the war was an unsettlingly positive development. Two Islamic countries fighting one another distracted them from attacking the Jewish State. The looming threat of a victory by one side creating instability by upending the regional power structure led Menachem Begin publicly to describe the conflict as a "very dangerous event" that "concerns Israel because it is in the periphery of the Middle East." Years into the war, when the Labor Party resumed a role in Israel's government,²⁷⁴ Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin was more open about the advantages of a prolonged war. He observed, "Iraq is tied down in its war with Iran, and there is no doubt that the lengthy war, which is now entering its seventh year, has exacted a high price in human lives, and in terms of Iraq's national morale and its economy, and its end is not yet in

²⁷³ Ra'ad al-Hamdani, one of Saddam's generals during the war, cites two political motives for war. Iraq sought to redraw the Iran-Iraq border more favorably than in the 1975 Algiers Accord. Second, Saddam wanted a decisive victory over the Iranians to solidify his claim to leadership of the Pan-Arab movement, a position unoccupied by Nasser's death and Sadat's peace treaty with the Israelis. Cited in Kevin M. Woods et al., *Saddam's War: An Iraqi Military Perspective of the Iran-Iraq War* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2009), 5.

²⁷⁴ Israel has a multi-party system in which political alliances are continually shifting, frequently based upon disagreements over foreign policy strategies.

sight. Even if it ends, tension will remain. It's hard for me to see Iraq being anxious for an additional military adventure against Israel after such a long and wearing war."²⁷⁵

Even as the war continued, Israel needed to calculate its strategic interests in different outcomes. An Iraqi victory was likely to provide Saddam with additional territory and more access to natural resources while increasing his regional power. It could also validate the military prowess of the Iraqi army, emboldening the leadership to pursue other military objectives. On the other side, the consequences of an Iranian victory were less clear, but also risky for Israel. Khomeini's vitriolic rhetoric and the idea that the extremist elements of his government might seek to extend their victory unnerved Israeli leadership. In particular, they worried about Iran's support for the Palestinian Liberation Organization and other anti-Israel organizations, as well as Khomeini's vow to "export" Iran's Islamic Revolution abroad. Israel feared that its regional presence would become even more uncomfortable if other majority Muslim states followed Iran's path toward theocratic governance. Hence, Israel faced the proverbial conundrum: One outcome would embolden a known historical enemy state while victory for Iran would subject Israel to an emerging enemy state with uncertain motives.

Israel's calculations eventually led it to side with Iran for several reasons. Despite the Iranian rhetoric, Israeli officials viewed Iran as the lesser of the two evils. They reasoned that if Iran was fighting for survival, it might not have the luxury to engage in more than a rhetorical war. There might even be space to explore a back-channel relationship. By contrast, Iraq was, according to Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, the

²⁷⁵ 'Interview with Defense Minister Rabin in Yediot Achronot', 26 September 1986, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/MFADocuments/Yearbook7/Pages/194%20Interview%20with%20Defense%20Minister%20Rabin%20in%20Yedio.aspx>.

foremost “extremist” state in the region. Sharon explained that this assessment did not mean Israel was comfortable with Iran, but rather that while Iran posed the larger strategic challenge, the Iraqis were the greater threat.²⁷⁶

Inherent in Sharon’s assessment was another influential factor, namely uncertainty regarding the future of post-Revolutionary Iran. Few Israeli senior defense and security officials had much knowledge of Iran, and Israeli scholarship focusing on the modern nation was sparse. Both the number of participants and the depth of the debate in the decision-making process were limited. According to Ronen Cohen, a professor at Ariel University who has written several books on Iran, there was some academic debate about the logic of supporting Iran, but the future of Israel’s relationship with Iran was never discussed in government forums.²⁷⁷ Yossi Alpher, a young officer in the Mossad at the time, confirms the dearth of knowledge. In the introduction to his book on the history of the Periphery Alliance, he describes how following the Revolution he was assigned Mossad’s Iran Desk despite having no prior experience with the country.²⁷⁸

The Israeli public similarly had little understanding of Iran’s internal dynamics and its future position vis-à-vis Israel. In his study of Israeli “Iranophobia,” Haggai Ram posited that Israelis were confused by the Revolution’s aftermath.²⁷⁹ As a people who had thrown off colonial rule, they were sympathetic to a revolutionary ouster of an oppressive monarchy, believing that such change could be progressive. Filtering the uprising through their own independence narrative that achieved modernization and democratic governance, they could hope that Iran’s “popular” movement would create

²⁷⁶ ‘Interview with Defense Minister Sharon in the Wall Street Journal’.

²⁷⁷ Rabi and Cohen, *Iran, Israel & the ‘Shi’ite Crescent’*, 49.

²⁷⁸ Alpher, *Periphery*.

²⁷⁹ Haggai Ram, *Iranophobia: The Logic of an Israeli Obsession* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009).

space for democratic development.²⁸⁰ Ironically, Ram speculates that Israelis were slower to recognize the negative consequences associated with the clerics' consolidation of power since they had just elected a conservative Likud government, which would be more beholden to policy demands from Israel's religious establishment.²⁸¹

Whether because of or despite the absence of knowledge about present-day Iran and its future, once they realized the danger, Israelis hoped that the Khomeini government would be temporary. While wishful thinking is human nature, in the Israeli case it was grounded in experience. Since the founding of the state, Israelis faced a continuing struggle between those who would impose theocratic governance and those who maintained a secular Judaism. Israel had muddled through the tensions while maintaining fealty to democratic values and international alliances. So too, they believed, would Iranians reject theocratic dictates that disrupted their lives and belied the nation's advantageous international ties. Yossi Alpher coined the term "Periphery nostalgia" to describe Israelis' wishful thinking. He explained that the term referred to "the presumption that because Iran has historic tensions with the Arab world and because one Iranian regime, that of the Shah, seemingly aligned itself strategically with Israel over the course of two decades, this pattern of alliance and shared strategic interests must through some form of historical determination or strategic norm, continue to manifest itself in Israel's relations with Iran."²⁸² Such nostalgia, however,

²⁸⁰ This was not totally fanciful; Iran had tried constitutional government at various points in its past, first following the Constitutional Revolution at the beginning of the twentieth century, and later, most famously, when Mohammad Mosaddegh became prime minister for a brief period before being forced out by a United States-orchestrated coup d'état.

²⁸¹ By contrast, Israel's liberal elite had cause for moral panic when it realized that Iran's clerics were rejecting secularism and modernism. They feared that the rabbinical establishment might bring about a similar fate in Israel. Ram, *Iranophobia*.

²⁸² Alpher, *Periphery*.

created a cognitive bias of false understanding, which prevented Israelis from recognizing their own ignorance.

Understandably, those Israelis with the closest ties to the Shah's regime experienced the strongest cognitive dissonance. This included intelligence officials, military officers, and Israeli businesspersons who, based upon their experience, opined that the new theocratic dictator did not represent the feelings or interests of the "true" Iran. They argued that Israel should somehow seek to maintain the Periphery Doctrine, including information exchange and economic development assistance, despite the temporary regime change. Ariel Sharon even put forth a plan to reinstall the Shah with the help of the Israeli military.²⁸³ The Iran-Iraq War kept alive the hopes of a continued Israel-Iran relationship. Thus, Israel provided arms to Iran, and as late as 1986, Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin justified the continued shipments by claiming that Iran was "Israel's best friend."²⁸⁴ Of course, it helped that some Israelis were realizing considerable profits from the arms sales. Israeli investigative reporter Ronan Bergman explained that "More than anything else, the weapons industry wanted to make money."²⁸⁵ According to Bergman, when Israel commenced secret sales to Iran, one military official told him that there was never a discussion of the ethics of these weapons sales, or what they would mean politically for Israel if the deals became public.

D. Iran-Contra

Israel's role in transferring weapons to the Islamic Republic eventually came to light as part of what became known as the Iran-Contra Affair. A full exploration of this scandal goes beyond the scope of this project, but Israel's role in creating the plan and

²⁸³ Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*, 91.

²⁸⁴ 'Israeli Defence Minister Says Iran Is "Israel's Best Friend"' (BBC, 30 October 1987).

²⁸⁵ Ronen Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran: The 30-Year Clandestine Struggle Against the World's Most Dangerous Terrorist Power*, 1 edition (New York: Free Press, 2008).

facilitating the process is worthy of consideration in light of what it reveals about Israel's relationship with Iran after the Revolution.

The scandal, which involved the sale of American arms to Iran in exchange for the release of American hostages held in Lebanon, as well as the use of the proceeds by the United States to fund an anti-communist guerilla insurgency in Nicaragua, was the biggest foreign policy crisis of President Ronald Reagan's administration. The Israeli government did not participate extensively in the public hearings in the United States that followed the disclosure of the program, nor did they hold any of their own. In his autobiography published after he left office, Reagan wrote that the original idea for the weapons transfers came from the Israelis. He called Israel the "prime mover," and said that the Israelis promised that the weapons would only be supplied to Iranian "moderates" and not to Khomeini hardliners.²⁸⁶ Reagan's personal account is likely self-serving, but the Congressional report on the affair at least partially corroborates his claim. In addition to the release of American hostages, the Israelis suggested that providing arms to the Iranians held out the prospect of improved American relations with Iran.²⁸⁷

Ultimately, the initiative proved unsuccessful at either securing the release of the hostages or improving relations with Iran.²⁸⁸ Nevertheless, the Israelis sought to

²⁸⁶ Walter Pincus, 'Reagan Calls Israel Prime Mover in Iran-Contra', *Washington Post*, 5 November 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/11/05/reagan-calls-israel-prime-mover-in-iran-contra/71b08cdd-eea8-43aa-a744-e5949f93764e/>.

²⁸⁷ Lee H. Hamilton, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair, with Supplemental, Minority, and Additional Views*, 1st Edition (Government Printing Office, 1987), 6.

²⁸⁸ Part of the problem stemmed from an absence of trust between the two sides. The United States and Israel, knowing that Iran was desperate for military supplies in its war against Saddam, both overcharged and under-delivered. When the CIA subsequently attempted to present Iran with a forged list to justify the prices, the Iranians saw through the attempt. Hamilton, 248.

continue the transfers. Israeli officials were so eager to sell arms to the Iranians that they offered to accept full-responsibility as well as absorb all financial and material losses should the plan not succeed. They were effectively indemnifying the United States against any negative repercussions. U.S. Secretary of State George Schultz pointed out to National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane that Israel, unlike the United States, had no policy against selling arms to Iran, and that given the hostility of most of its neighbors, Israel might be more willing to gamble on the prospect of future changes in the Iranian government.²⁸⁹

At the same time, Israel's motivations included a desire to maintain the conflict for as long as possible. The United States and Israel were eager to avoid a decisive victory by either side, and the Israelis further hoped that the fighting would drain the resources of both countries, thereby reducing the possibility that they would redirect their hostility toward Israel once hostilities ceased.²⁹⁰

E. The End of Options

The protracted war between Iraq and Iran ended 1988 when the United Nations brokered a ceasefire and sent peacekeepers to enforce it. After eight years of fighting the combatants had achieved little except for sustaining millions of casualties. Each side retreated to their pre-war borders. Ironically, while Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran sought to exploit the instability of the new regime, he actually contributed to saving it.

Khomeini's capacity to rally the Iranian people to repel the Iraqi invasion solidified his power. His subsequent ill-fated invasion of Iraq, which prolonged the conflict, did not undermine his leadership. Instead, fueled by memories of Iraqi

²⁸⁹ Hamilton, 279.

²⁹⁰ Samuel Segev, *The Iranian Triangle: The Untold Story of Israel's Role in the Iran-Contra Affair*, 29th edition (New York: Macmillan USA, 1988), 249.

atrocities, including chemical weapons attacks, and angered by United States support of their enemy, the people supported government efforts to secure the nation from future threats. They approved efforts to rebuild the Iranian military and strengthen defense capabilities. At the same time, they feared that Iraq might develop nuclear weapons.²⁹¹

For Israel the war did not last long enough. Although the war initially helped Khomeini secure his leadership, the Israelis calculated that a long and costly conflict would eventually destabilize the government and lead to an internal revolt. Not only did this not happen, but both Khomeini and Saddam Hussein remained in power. Moreover, Saddam appeared to have the capacity to rebuild Iraq's nuclear capacity, as well as to expand its chemical and biological weapons program.²⁹²

Unexpectedly, Iran soon proved even more challenging than Iraq. The country had developed a new military corps, known as the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), whose members committed to enforcing the fundamentalist religious principles of the Islamic Revolution. The IRGC assumed both the principal police and military functions. It supplanted the traditional army, which had included the formerly Israeli-friendly officer corps from the days of imperial Iran. Most of those men, who had engaged in personal or professional contacts and exchanges with Israel, had died or been killed in battle or purges. For members of the IRGC, opposing Israel and exporting the Islamic revolution were core values.

²⁹¹ Early in the conflict, the Israeli Air Force carried out a bombing raid against the Osirak Reactor in Iraq as part of Operation OPERA. The surprise attack successfully destroyed the reactor and was credited with halting the Iraqi nuclear development program.

²⁹² For both Israel and Iran, the war demonstrated the Iraqi dictator's affinity for and willingness to use weapons of mass destruction. Israel's bombing of the Osirak nuclear reactor had not prevented Saddam from devastating chemical weapons attacks. While the protracted war with Iran reduced the threat of an Iraqi conventional war against Israel, the war's end left Iraq free to invest in further developing chemical and biological weapons as well as to rebuild its nuclear facilities and conventional military.

As an initial target, Iran focused on Lebanon, in particular the Israeli-occupied south. Israel invaded south Lebanon in 1982 during the Lebanese civil war in order to expel the PLO forces operating in the area. Allied with Christian militia forces, they established a buffer zone between Lebanese and Israeli territory.²⁹³ The predominately Shiite region provided fertile recruiting ground for Iranian agents looking to support co-religionist opposition groups. Iran exploited residents' discontent with an oppressive occupation. It gradually extended its influence over the Hezbollah and Amal organizations by providing them with weapons, training, and logistical support for their fight against the Israelis. Meanwhile, Israel appeared to underestimate this developing threat on its northern border as it struggled to maintain control over the local population.²⁹⁴

For Israel to acknowledge Iran as a “real,” not merely a rhetorical enemy meant that many of its government officials and analysts had miscalculated. Its support of Iran during its war with Iraq had not produced the hoped-for moderation in Iran's opposition to Israel's existence. On the contrary, with the war over, Iran engaged in arming terrorist groups to attack Israel while it openly embraced the Palestinian cause. Iran's active opposition to Israel created a shared interest with countries in the region, with which it otherwise had little in common. Clearly, Israel and the Islamic Republic had begun a new chapter of their history.

²⁹³ Israeli forces remained in Lebanon until May 2000. Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel*, First Edition (New York: Random House, 2011).

²⁹⁴ According to Blanford, the Israelis were initially welcomed as liberators by the predominantly Shiite population in southern Lebanon, but quickly lost favor due to an alliance with brutal Christian militias and a lack of cultural respect for Shiite customs. In October 1983, Israeli forces intruded during an Ashura ceremony commemorating the death of Husayn ibn Ali, the Prophet Mohammad's grandson. Blanford cites this event as having “let the Shia genie out of the bottle.” Blanford.

V. Conclusion

The history of the erratic relationship between Persians and Jews and Israel and Iran is as much a story about the actions of external forces as it is about choices made by the nation's rulers and leaders. From ancient times through the founding of the Islamic Republic, there was no consistent narrative that made the next development obvious or inevitable. Not even the geopolitical and religious conflicts between the two nations and peoples fit within conventional historical understanding. The Persians did not oppress the Jews; the Iranians were not Arabs or part of the pan-Arabist Soviet supported orbit. Both peoples had a long, proud, and distinct heritage that did not include a legacy of enmity toward one another.

Some key parts of the history of Israeli-Iranian interaction are not well known. The mythical story of the Persian King and his Jewish Queen is a book of the Hebrew Bible. Similarly, the chronicles of Cyrus's patronage on behalf of his Jewish subjects is detailed in Jewish historical accounts, meriting only passing mentions in general histories of the period. Iran and Israel conducted their twentieth century Periphery Alliance, by which the new state of Israel and the re-enthroned Shah helped one another enhance their nation's security and economy, in secret. Their cooperation is a testament both to how states engage in mutually beneficial cooperation and to how officials' public rhetoric may contradict private relations.

History is always important as a descriptive record of events that contributed to our present. It aids our understanding of why events happened and produced particular consequences. When historical accounts are incomplete or inaccurate, their value is not only diminished but they can also be misused. Such is the challenge presented by the history of Israel's relationship with Iran. History suggested that the new Israeli state might develop a working relationship with a non-Arab state on the periphery of a hostile

region. Israeli officials endowed the alliance with historical significance and miscalculated the strength of Iran's commitment. Few had studied Iran's own history or uncovered the nuances that would influence its future development and inform its international relations.

The following chapters detail how Israeli officials revised their understanding of the historical relationship as Israel and Iran became enemies. Eventually, the new version would serve as the backdrop for a narrative that cast Iran as an existential threat to Israel. The power of the narrative detailing this threat obscured Israeli officials' absence of knowledge, mistakes in foresight, and misreading of Iranian intentions. In this version of history, the Islamic Republic is the incarnation of Israel's historic enemy.

Chapter Three: Securitization, Part I

I. Introduction

It is notable that Israel and the Islamic Republic have not engaged in a hot war.²⁹⁵ Their leaders hurled murderous insults at one another; their officials engaged in a war of words; they recruited and trained effective military forces; and they inflicted damage on one another using proxies. While this does not make their enmity unique, it necessitates a deeper look into their hostility toward one another so as to understand how their conflict shaped each other's perspectives and policies.

There are some similarities to the Cold War, in which the United States and the Soviet Union cast each other as an existential threat that justified the investment of massive resources into continuous war readiness, as well as engagement in nuclear brinkmanship. Unlike the superpowers' stand-off, however, the origins of the Israeli-Iranian conflict are not as evident. There is not a competition to extend their territorial and ideological hegemony to the same geographical space.²⁹⁶ In fact, as many commentators have noted, the two countries have no significant overlapping strategic interests.²⁹⁷ Moreover, they share an animosity to Sunni terrorist organizations,

²⁹⁵ Iranians accused Israelis of engaging in "warlike" acts such as deploying a cyber-attack and assassinating Iranian nuclear scientists. Israel did not claim credit for these acts. See Appendix II.

²⁹⁶ Israel is concerned about Iran's extending its sphere of influence to other countries in the region and maintains that Iran has hegemonic ambitions that threaten Israel. Unlike the superpowers, the two nations are not openly engaged in a zero-sum competition for power, influence, or territory.

²⁹⁷ Commentators on both sides have made this argument at various times with some even stressing that Israel and Iran share important interests. Bahgat examined the shared interests in his book on Israeli-Persian Gulf relations. Israeli Prof. Efraim Inbar, head of Israel's BESA Center, pointed out in 1998 that all Iran's strategic interests lie in its immediate vicinity and do not extend to Israel. Bahgat, *Israel and the Persian Gulf*; Efraim Inbar, 'The Iranian Threat Reconsidered', *Jerusalem Post*, 10 August 1998.

including Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which could have, at least theoretically, provided a basis for strategic coordination.

It is notable too that their enmity has been largely asymmetrical. Each country has engaged in vilifying the other, but this has rarely occurred with the same intensity. The same is true for their leaderships' policy focus. Israel's fear of Iran penetrates deeper into its policymaking than Iran's concern with Israel, even though only Israel possesses nuclear weapons capability.

This chapter examines how Israel's foreign policy evolved from viewing Iran as a peripheral threat to treating it as a primary strategic challenge. Building upon the history examined in Chapter 2, I analyze how the conduct and messages of Israel's political leaders and intellectual elites framed Iran as an existential threat to Israel's nationhood. The basis for this study is the public record, in particular the words and media reports that comprise the narrative defining Iran's threat to Israel. I submit that analysis of this material, composed for Israel's domestic public and for Western international audiences, reveals how leaders generated the support for an Iranian threat narrative built in larger part upon a social and political construct than upon a realistic threat of annihilation.

As a preliminary matter, it is curious that there is no consensus on the origins of the Israeli-Iranian "cold war." Some Israeli experts have sought to identify an event that marked the beginning.²⁹⁸ This effort may stem from the reluctance of Israelis to recognize that all cooperative ventures between the two countries had ended. Thus, they sought to identify a transformative moment. The obvious choice was the Islamic

²⁹⁸ In formal and informal discussions over the course of this project, answers varied. Many cited the 1979 Revolution, while others listed the resurgence of the nuclear program in the 1990s. Others declined to give dates, noting instead that Iran's "ideology" made conflict with Israel inevitable.

Revolution's installation of a theocracy avowedly dedicated to the destruction of Israel. Although belied by the arms sales during the Iran-Iraq war, this explanation has gained acceptance over time as the hostility of Israel toward Iran has intensified and memories have faded. As a transformative explanation, however, it relies upon words and excludes behavior. As the previous chapter details, although the Islamic Republic's first Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, excoriated Israel for supporting the Shah and oppressing the Palestinians, he also readily accepted its military assistance in his war against Iraq.²⁹⁹ While the Ayatollah considered the Jewish State to be a foe, he did not see it as much of a threat as the hostile Sunni-led Arab nation equipped with a powerful military situated along Iran's western border. Moreover, Israeli leaders also calculated that Iran was less threatening than Iraq in their decision to provide assistance to a country led by a ruler publicly calling for its destruction. To be sure, the Islamic Revolution signaled a dramatic change in the status quo and created uncertainty about the future, but arguably the strategic concerns that had brought the two nations together still existed.

It is questionable whether there is value in finding the historical moment,³⁰⁰ but it is notable that the candidates involve an action or threat against Israel attributed to Iran. For example, some experts point to bombings perpetrated by Iran-supported surrogates, singling out such high-profile attacks as the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Argentina or the 1994 bombing of the Asociacion Mutual Israelita Argentina building. Others offer a vaguer explanation, suggesting a gradual deterioration in

²⁹⁹ See discussion of Iran-Iraq War in Chapter 2, Part IV, Sections C-D.

³⁰⁰ As former chess champion and political activist Garry Kasparov notes, "There is an irresistible tendency to look only for big moments in history. While such moments do exist, long-term trends and patterns usually matter more than any one decision or event." Garry Kasparov, *Winter Is Coming: Why Vladimir Putin and the Enemies of the Free World Must Be Stopped* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2015).

relations following the Islamic Revolution.³⁰¹ One influential actor cited Iran's decision to train and supply Hezbollah and Amal forces in Lebanon beginning in the 1980s.³⁰² Others argue that the permanent severance of a relationship came with Iran's resurrection of its nuclear program in the early 1990s.³⁰³ One Israeli investigative journalist argues that the enmity predates the nuclear revelations. Still others claim that the 2006 Lebanon War and subsequent events served as a "wake up call" for Israelis to the secret long war Israel had been fighting with Iran over the course of several decades.³⁰⁴ This would require a rethinking of the modern history of Iran and the State of Israel.

Iran's post-Revolutionary words and deeds indisputably represent a break with its past policies regardless of the particular moment. More significant to understanding the future course of their confrontational posture are the reasons for the hostility. There are two notable extant academic theories that identify the forces instigating the antagonism. One advanced by Trita Parsi holds that the convergence in 1991 of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the American-led defeat of Saddam Hussein caused Israel to restructure its threat perception.³⁰⁵ The second is Haggai Ram's psychology-based argument that fear of Iran emerged when Israel's Ashkenazi Jewish majority

³⁰¹ Interview with Soli Shahvar, interview by Jonathan Leslie, Haifa, Israel, 4 November 2015.

³⁰² This was the explanation given by former Labor Knesset Member Ephraim Sneh, whose role in defining the Iranian threat is discussed in detail *infra*. Interview with Ephraim Sneh, interview by Jonathan Leslie, Tel Aviv, Israel, 26 November 2015.

³⁰³ Several experts expressed this view, among them Emily Landau, a proliferation analyst at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) and Raz Zimmt, an Iran analyst at Tel Aviv University. Interview with Emily Landau, interview by Jonathan Leslie, Tel Aviv, Israel, 7 January 2016; Interview with Raz Zimmt, interview by Jonathan Leslie, Tel Aviv, Israel, 24 November 2015.

³⁰⁴ This is essentially Ronen Bergman's claim in his widely-read *The Secret War with Iran* (the lessons from this book will be discussed in further detail later), but was also expressed by other authors of more recent books on the subject. Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran*; Interview with Yaakov Katz, interview by Jonathan Leslie, Jerusalem, Israel, 27 October 2015.

³⁰⁵ Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*.

perceived a threat to their power from the non-European Mizrahi Jews. Ram maintains that the Ashkenazi establishment projected their fear of losing power onto Iran.³⁰⁶ For our purposes, his reasoning is less important than the idea that the conflict originated within Israelis' collective psyche rather than with specific actions taken by Iran.

I believe that while both scholars contribute to our understanding, neither provides a full explanation. Parsi correctly identifies that the early 1990s were a key turning point for Israel's framing of its security concerns both regionally and specifically vis-à-vis Iran. Ram's argument that fear, rather than rational strategic thinking, was a principal driver of Israelis' decision to identify Iran as a top security threat also has merit. The missing element in the discussion is how each nation's leader operating within his internal political and cultural frameworks constructed a narrative of the "other" as a potential combatant. This characterization then drove each leader's development of national foreign policy.

II. The Emergence of the Threat Narrative

A. Emergence of the Threat Narrative

Despite Israeli leadership's disappointment that the Iran-Iraq War had ended, the end of hostilities received little attention among Israelis, although it raised considerable uncertainty about the future. Remarkably, a war that had lasted eight years and caused millions of casualties had little effect on Israelis' daily lives. The disclosure of Israeli weapons sales to Iran in the middle of the war caused a minor stir but no public debate over the wisdom of the decision. Defense Minister Rabin had called the conflict between Iran and Iraq "a balance of threat," in which the best outcome for

³⁰⁶ Ram, *Iranophobia*.

Israel would be a “no win situation.”³⁰⁷ Although neither side won, the end of fighting could mean the end of the distraction that kept them from targeting Israel.

One reason the war’s end was peripheral to Israeli concerns was that Israelis were far more preoccupied with the security challenges within and along their borders. The initiation of the first Palestinian Intifada in December 1987, a year before the end of the Iran-Iraq War, surprised most Israelis. Beginning as a leaderless and disorganized uprising, it grew into a sustained campaign of civil disobedience, public protest, and, eventually, acts of violence. It disrupted Israeli life for four years. Importantly, it created an immediate and imminent sense of personal insecurity among Israelis who felt they could at any moment be a victim of a random terrorist attack.

At the same time, the Israeli army was still engaged in military operations in South Lebanon. Israel had inserted itself into the Lebanese Civil War in 1982 when it invaded and occupied southern Lebanon seeking to root out Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) operations there. It continued its advance northward, stopping just short of the capital Beirut. Although by the late 1980s the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) had withdrawn to a small strip of land along Israel’s northern border, it was still an occupying force.³⁰⁸ Together with its ally the South Lebanese Army, a Christian militia, the IDF had control over nearly 100,000 Lebanese civilians, who were predominantly Shiite Muslims.³⁰⁹ Although the IDF had been originally welcomed as liberators upon arrival in 1982, their sustained presence and apparent disregard for religious customs sparked resistance. This opened a new front of confrontation with armed organizations

³⁰⁷ Sobhani, *The Pragmatic Entente: Israeli-Iranian Relations, 1948-1988*, 149.

³⁰⁸ This occupation served two purposes: to root out Palestinian resistance that might threaten Israel and to provide a buffer zone between Israel and the continuing civil war in northern Lebanon.

³⁰⁹ Gal Luft, ‘Israel’s Security Zone in Lebanon - A Tragedy?’, *Middle East Quarterly*, 1 September 2000, <http://www.meforum.org/70/israels-security-zone-in-lebanon-a-tragedy>.

such as Amal and Hezbollah.³¹⁰ In November 1988, amidst this turmoil, Israel held national elections in which Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and his Likud Party narrowly held on to power by winning a razor-thin plurality.³¹¹

Israel was thus not paying much attention to developments in Iran at this time. On June 3, 1989, less than a year after the end of the war with Iraq, the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader and founder Ayatollah Khomeini died. Knowing that Khomeini was in declining health, officials had prepared a succession plan that called for the elevation of President Ali Khamenei to the position of Supreme Leader.³¹² In elections held the following month, voters chose Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to replace Khamenei as president.³¹³ Initially, Israelis had no reason to see the change in the leaders' identities as a significant shift in Iran's policies or attitudes toward Israel. They knew Khamenei to be a fiercely hardline cleric, who shared the conservatism of Khomeini.³¹⁴

³¹⁰ Blanford, *Warriors of God*.

³¹¹ The elections followed the outbreak of the Palestinian intifada in 1987 and the reduction of Israeli occupation of south Lebanon. It pitted the hawkish Likud party, led by Shamir, against the more dovish Alignment, led by Shimon Peres. The big change was the emergence of the religious parties as a political force. Peres chose to continue the unity government in the wake of the election but kept the prime minister position exclusively for Likud. Robert O. Freedman, 'Religion, Politics, and the Israeli Elections of 1988', *Middle East Journal* 43, no. 3 (1989): 406–22.

³¹² The Supreme Leader of Iran is selected by the Assembly of Experts (مجلس خبرگان). Its members are directly elected once every eight years, with all candidates first vetted by the Guardian Council. The First Assembly, which served from 1982-1991, is the only Assembly to conduct a selection process for Supreme Leader.

³¹³ Like the Assembly of Experts, all presidential candidates are first vetted by the Guardian Council. In 1989, it allowed only two candidates on the ballot, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Abbas Sheibani. This flawed scheme produced a predictable result – Rafsanjani won the presidency with 96.1% of the vote.

³¹⁴ Khamenei's views on Israel at the time of his becoming the Supreme Leader position were not well known. Recent Israeli reports cite Khomeini's statement on Quds Day 2000 as the earliest indication of his anti-Semitic/anti-Zionist rhetoric. Joshua Teitelbaum, 'What Iranian Leaders Really Say About Doing Away with Israel: A Refutation of the Campaign to Excuse Ahmadinejad's Incitement to Genocide' (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2008), 15,

This changed when they learned of Iran's plans to convene a "terror summit," to which it would invite representatives of Fatah, Hezbollah, Amal, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Israeli officials feared that the Tehran gathering with the new Supreme Leader aimed to formulate a strategy for confronting Israel. The gathering prompted predictions in the press of a coming "terror wave" against Israel.³¹⁵

Iran, however, was sending confusing signals. While the Supreme Leader planned to convene a terror summit, President Rafsanjani called for improved relations with the West. What did it mean for the religious leader to strategize on the use of terrorism while the elected leader signaled an interest in improving the nation's international standing? Israeli officials chose to explore the potential for reestablishing cooperation with Iran based upon a mutual enemy strategy. Iran still feared Iraq, believing that Saddam Hussein was continuing to stockpile chemical and biological weapons. Israeli officials, too, suspected Saddam's hostile intentions, believing that he might someday decide to attack their country. Thus, according to Israel's security and political establishment, including elements of the country's political right, Israel would benefit from Iran's normalization of relations with the West. Such a development would provide Israel with a modicum of protection from Iraq while providing Israel's allies with leverage to restrain Iranian aggression. As the *Jerusalem Post*, a reliable indicator of

<https://www.scribd.com/document/7632012/What-Iranian-Leaders-Really-Say-About-Doing-Away-With-Israel>.

³¹⁵ High-ranking Israeli officials previously expressed fear of a "terror wave" by Iranian-backed groups. In a 1987 interview, Defense Minister Rabin claimed that a "wave of terror" was being carried out by the "Iranian-backed Hizbollah group." David Horovitz, 'Middle East Terror Wave Predicted', *Jerusalem Post*, 17 July 1989; 'Interview with Defense Minister Rabin on Israel Television and on Israel Radio', 6 January 1987, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/MFADocuments/Yearbook7/Pages/216%20Interview%20with%20Defense%20Minister%20Rabin%20on%20Israe.aspx>.

right-wing sentiment in Israel, editorialized, “A strong, stable Iran is the best available antidote to Iraqi threats.”³¹⁶

Israel’s decision made more sense once it emerged that Israel had not actually severed all ties with Iran. In December 1989, the U.S. State Department revealed that Israel had quietly resumed purchasing oil from Iran. The deal, arranged by Uri Lubrani, an Israeli Defense Ministry official who had been head of mission in Tehran during the last days of the Shah, meant that the two countries were continuing the tacit economic cooperation they had developed during the war. The strategy also enabled Israelis to hope that they could secure Iran’s help in facilitating the release of IDF hostages being held in Lebanon by Hezbollah and Amal.

The disclosure of the oil sale produced different public narratives for different audiences. Iranian elites wanted the world to know of its enduring enmity toward Israel. *The Tehran Times*, Iran’s English daily, ran an inflammatory story decrying the sale of oil to the Zionists and pledging that “enmity will continue as long as this cancer exists in the heartland of the Islamic Land.”³¹⁷ By contrast, Israeli leaders cited the sales as evidence of a difference between Iran’s public rhetoric and strategic interests. Defense Minister Rabin implied that the only barrier to economic cooperation with Iran was the latter’s attitude, which could be surmounted. He did not think that Iran’s boycott of Israeli products would mean that they would refuse to use Israeli weapons.³¹⁸ Significantly, he did not voice concern that Iran might someday use these weapons against Israel.

As the twentieth century entered its final decade, the public enmity between Israel and Iran was asymmetrical. Iran’s rhetoric was far more belligerent, but its

³¹⁶ Editorial Board, ‘U.S., Iran and the Hostages’, *Jerusalem Post*, 8 May 1990.

³¹⁷ *Tehran Times*, December 21, 1989. Via Wolf Blitzer, ‘Gov’t and Intelligence Sources Leaked Oil Story’, *Jerusalem Post*, 22 December 1989.

³¹⁸ David Makovsky, ‘Rabin: Arms Sales Hurt by Global Peace’, *Jerusalem Post*, 27 December 1989.

strategic interests did not appear to include initiating active confrontation with Israel. For Israel, engaged with other foes, Iran did not merit a narrative. Rather, there remained the hope that, despite Iran's rhetoric, there might be avenues of cooperation for the mutual benefit of the two nations.

B. Defining Iran as the Enemy

i. Launching the Narrative

The Iranian threat narrative entered a new phase on January 20, 1993.³¹⁹ On that day, a tendentious public exchange by Israel's highest officials indicated that all hope of cooperation between Israel and Iran was over. The drama began when Labor Minister Ephraim Sneh³²⁰ rose in the Knesset to pose a parliamentary question about Iran to Prime Minister Rabin. This question designated Iran as a concern separate and apart from the other states of the region, implying that Iran had become one of Israel's most disconcerting adversaries, which deserved prioritization among the nation's security threats.

Notably, Sneh became the first Israeli government official to use the phrase "existential threat" (אייום קיומי) to describe the magnitude of the danger posed by Iran. Sneh methodically outlined a case against Iran as an enemy that Israel "can't ignore." He identified three characteristics that made the country a danger to Israel: its ideology, its efforts to spread its influence regionally and globally, and its desire to acquire weapons of mass destruction. In support of the latter, he cited statements made by CIA director

³¹⁹ Sneh reports in his book that this event took place on January 26, 1993, but Knesset transcripts and news reports verify that it occurred six days earlier. Also on January 20, Bill Clinton's began his first term as U.S. President. Ephraim Sneh, *Navigating Perilous Waters: An Israeli Strategy for Peace and Security* (Routledge, 2004).

³²⁰ Dr. Sneh was a Labor Party ally of Prime Minister Rabin. He had been a medical doctor and served in the IDF for over 20 years, retiring as a Brigadier General before entering politics.

Robert Gates. Finally, Sneh raised the issue of Israel's newly discovered vulnerability by invoking the memory of Saddam's cruise missile attacks as evidence of what a remote but dangerous tyrant with a "lack of inhibition" can do to Israel. Addressing the Iran threat, he maintained, went beyond economic concerns: "To us, this is not a matter of oil, it is a matter of blood."³²¹

The Prime Minister's response did not challenge Sneh's claims, although he sounded a more cautious note. He too believed that Iran was both pursuing purchase of nuclear weapons and beginning to develop its own nuclear industry. He characterized the danger as representing a medium-to-long-term threat. While he acknowledged that Iran held the potential to be more dangerous than Iraq, he added a caveat. He noted that while Israel was right to be concerned about these developments, it should not allow Iran to inhibit Israel's ultimate foreign policy goal of advancing the cause of regional peace.³²²

Rabin's Knesset speech represented a change in his public position as an advocate for engagement with Iran. In 1987, Rabin had portrayed Iran as a natural geopolitical ally of Israel.³²³ Two years later, he defended Israel's decision to do business with Iran following disclosure of Israel's secret oil purchases.³²⁴ While recent developments suggested that present interaction between the two countries was politically inadvisable, Rabin also appeared to be foreclosing future engagement.

³²¹ '54th Meeting of the 13th Knesset', 20 January 1993, Knesset Transcripts.

³²² '54th Meeting of the 13th Knesset'.

³²³ Sobhani, *The Pragmatic Entente: Israeli-Iranian Relations, 1948-1988*; Victor Ostrovsky, *By Way of Deception: The Making of a Mossad Officer* (Scottsdale, AZ: Wilshire Press Inc., 2002); Segev, *The Iranian Triangle*; Trita Parsi, 'Israel-Iranian Relations Assessed: Strategic Competition from the Power Cycle Perspective', *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 2 (1 June 2005): 247-69.

³²⁴ Not only did Rabin confirm the sale of oil to Iran, he went further by suggesting that the only thing preventing further sales to the Iranians, including weaponry, was Iran's ideological opposition to using Israeli materials unless absolutely necessary. Makovsky, 'Rabin: Arms Sales Hurt by Global Peace'.

Although he admitted the threat from Iran was not imminent, he nonetheless prioritized it in Israel's security matrix.³²⁵ Iran was no longer peripheral to Israel's existence. Yossi Alpher later observed that Rabin's shift in tone signaled an abandonment of what Alpher called Israel's "Periphery nostalgia."³²⁶

The policy change implied a different depiction of Iranian society. Israelis should no longer picture Iran as a multi-polar society in which not all elements of its government shared the religious fervor of the clerical elite. According to Trita Parsi, after 1992 the foreign policy of Israel's ruling Labor Party rejected the presence of a "moderate" Iranian political faction.³²⁷ Moreover, the party line associated Iran's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction with its Islamic ideology. This portrait of a theocracy with nuclear ambitions was incompatible with the possibility of pursuing diplomatic solutions. From this followed the non-debatable proposition that Israel was the intended target of Iran's nuclear weapons. As Rabin later explained, "Iraq tried to develop nuclear weapons. Iran is trying to do this. Against whom, if not against Israel?"³²⁸

³²⁵ Notably, there was not much press follow-up to this Knesset event. The *Jerusalem Post* carried a short item on January 21 recapping the previous day's events, offering no further analysis or commentary on the assessments made by either Sneh or Rabin. Dan Izenberg, 'Rabin: Iran Potentially Greater Threat than Iraq', *Jerusalem Post*, 21 January 1993.

³²⁶ See chapter 2, *supra*, for more on "Periphery nostalgia." Shortly after Labor's 1992 election victory, Alpher, then a top Mossad official, called Iran Israel's "number one threat," claiming that it had become evident that Iran, like Iraq, was capable of destroying Israel. Therefore, there was no point in playing them off against one another. Clyde Haberman, 'THE WORLD; Israel Focuses on the Threat Beyond the Arabs -- in Iran', *The New York Times*, 8 November 1992, sec. Week in Review, <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/08/weekinreview/the-world-israel-focuses-on-the-threat-beyond-the-arabs-in-iran.html>.

³²⁷ Parsi, 'Israel-Iranian Relations Assessed', 256.

³²⁸ Batsheva Tsur, 'PM: Without Peace, War with Syria Likely', *Jerusalem Post*, 23 June 1994. Sneh later confirmed that this was his view in a 2004 interview reflecting on this period. He said, "In this region, we have to consider every weapon as if it is directed toward Israel." Sneh interview with Trita Parsi. October 31, 2004. Cited in Parsi, 'Israel-Iranian Relations Assessed'.

While Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons made news, the pivot from Iraq to Iran as a major threat to Israel did not garner significant public concern. Sneh and Rabin clearly identified a threat, but otherwise offered confusing details as to why that threat mattered. Moreover, their reasons for advancing the new narrative remained opaque. Even a decade later, Sneh offered no further clarification. In his 2004 book, *Navigating Perilous Waters: An Israeli Strategy for Peace and Security*, he characterized his Knesset speech as the moment that first "placed this danger on Israel's national agenda" and argued that the Iran of 1993 was the "most salient strategic threat to Israel's existence."³²⁹ Yet he failed to explain what prompted his action.

When asked again in 2015 for such an explanation, Sneh claimed that he had felt a duty to bring the issue to the attention of the Israeli public. He elaborated by recalling how, as a field commander in South Lebanon in the early 1980s, he had witnessed the influence of Iran in supporting Shiite resistance against the Israeli occupation. He explained how in 1982 he was particularly disturbed to witness Iran's role in helping terrorists establish a base for guerilla attacks against Israel.³³⁰ After becoming a member of the Knesset and serving on the Intelligence Subcommittee of the Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee, he read intelligence reports that led him to conclude that Iran was an unrecognized growing threat to Israel. By January 1993, he felt compelled to issue a warning.³³¹ Sneh indicated that he believed that Rabin's presence in the Knesset that day and his decision to validate Sneh's concerns contributed to raising the profile of the

³²⁹ Sneh, *Navigating Perilous Waters*, 55.

³³⁰ Sneh had been instrumental in laying the groundwork for the Israeli Security Zone in South Lebanon, and was, according to Avraham Sela, one of the Israeli commanders who had been "personally committed to the South Lebanese Army." Avraham Sela, 'Civil Society, the Military, and National Security: The Case of Israel's Security Zone in South Lebanon', *Israel Studies* 12, no. 1 (19 February 2007): 53–78; Oren Barak and Gabriel Sheffer, 'Israel's "Security Network" and Its Impact: An Exploration of a New Approach', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, no. 2 (May 2006): 235–61.

³³¹ Interview with Ephraim Sneh.

Iran threat.³³² This, then, was the moment that the Prime Minister, who was serving as his own Defense Minister, adopted the alarmist position from which he did not retreat during the remainder of his time in office.

Although few noticed, Rabin differed from Sneh in his understanding of the primary danger. For Rabin, the threat lay primarily in Iran's insidious support of terrorism. While he agreed that Iran was targeting Israel, its actions also represented a direct threat to the international community. Thus, following the reelection of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani as Iran's president, Rabin declared that Iran was a global danger.³³³ In a meeting of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense subcommittee, he added that Iran's ideologically driven expansionist aims included establishing a "terrorist infrastructure in Europe." This, he claimed, made Iran a unique foe since "even the Palestinian organizations never possessed such a ramified international infrastructure of terror."³³⁴

For Rabin, the terrorism threat went beyond targeting Israel. He claimed that Iran harbored "imperialist aspirations" and thus it sought to export its "Khomeinist ideology." This ascribed to Iranian leaders an ambitiously subversive agenda. According to Rabin, Iran would not seek to overthrow governments, but to "adapt its message to the local conditions and character of the society."³³⁵ It could thereby strategically extend its influence without investing in armed opposition. It could avoid being faulted for disrespecting a nation's sovereignty while working to undermine it.

³³² Sneh was particularly pleased that Rabin had chosen to attend the Knesset plenary himself rather than send a cabinet minister or lower level official. The Prime Minister's presence added gravitas to an issue that had previously been treated more as an afterthought than a priority. According to Sneh, Rabin had insisted that he provide the response to Sneh's statement on Iran himself. Interview with Ephraim Sneh.

³³³ Asher Wallfish, "Iran Greater Threat than Iraq", *Jerusalem Post*, 29 June 1993.

³³⁴ Wallfish.

³³⁵ Wallfish.

While Rabin and Sneh identified the same enemy, which they agreed could become an existential threat to Israel, they appeared to disagree on the means, and likely the timetable, for achieving the intended harm.

ii. The Debate

The 1993 Knesset colloquy raised an issue it did not settle. Fifteen months later, Rabin responded to a similar question about the relative danger posed by Iraq and Iran with the same answer but slightly different reasoning. He asserted, “No doubt I place more importance on Iran because it is the source of spreading extremist fundamentalist movements all over. They endanger all the moderate regimes in the Arab world.”³³⁶ As a consequence of directing attention to Iran, Rabin and his military establishment concluded that one method by which Iran was targeting Israel was by using its influence to disrupt Israeli efforts to establish a dialogue with Arab states.³³⁷ In voicing his concern, Rabin did not mention Iran’s nuclear program.

Rabin did not advance a specific Iran policy, but rather used Iran’s threat to justify his overall foreign policy objectives. By seeking to make peace with Israel’s Arab neighbors, Rabin reasoned that Israel would neutralize the Iranian threat. The peace imagined by Rabin would reduce the appeal of Iran’s revolutionary ideology in Arab states; it would weaken the connections between Iran, a non-Arab nation, and Arab terrorist organizations. If Israel could defuse the tension with those living within and

³³⁶ Alon Pinkas and David Makovsky, ‘Rabin: Killing Civilians Won’t Kill the Negotiations’, *Jerusalem Post*, 13 April 1994.

³³⁷ A statement by a foreign ministry official at the time reflects the degree to which the Sneh-Rabin view of Iran had taken root within the foreign policy machinery of the government: “I think that following several years of dwelling on the issue, the facts finally had their say. Iran is supporting fundamentalist movements all over the Arab world, constantly subverting moderate regimes with which we have or aspire to have a dialogue.” Alon Pinkas, ‘A Watchful Eye Widens on a Menacing Neighbor’, *Jerusalem Post*, 2 December 1994.

along its borders, Iran would not have a receptive audience for its belligerent, anti-Israel rhetoric.

Sneh, who had positioned himself as the most hawkish of Iran hawks, did not entirely agree with this assessment. While he concurred that the Iranian threat gave urgency to the Arab issue, he did not believe that an Israeli-Arab peace accord would fully resolve the Iranian threat. Sneh saw the advantage of a quick peace with the Arabs as enabling Israel to redirect its full attention to Iran, where a future nuclear conflict loomed.³³⁸ Whereas Rabin saw Iran as engaged in spreading its revolution through rhetoric and strategic assistance that included a threat to Israel, Sneh saw Iran as targeting Israel. For Sneh, resolving the Arab threat was essential for preventing Iran from arming its Arab allies and non-state terrorists with non-conventional weapons.

Rabin pursued his version of policy by working quietly with his Foreign Minister Shimon Peres in 1994 to set up what they called the “Peace in the Middle East Department.”³³⁹ They tasked it with leading an international diplomatic campaign against Iran by portraying the country as a globally destabilizing force driven by fanatical Shiite fundamentalism. Their goal was to isolate Iran from the international community.³⁴⁰ They reportedly attached great significance to the new initiative. Typical of the new narrative was a newspaper account describing Iran as “the greatest risk Israel

³³⁸ Itim, ‘We Don’t Have to Worry About Nuclear Attack, Says Bin-Nun’, *Jerusalem Post*, 18 May 1993.

³³⁹ Scant information exists concerning the origins or operations of this Department. It first appeared in an investigative piece by the Israeli journalist Aluf Benn in *Haaretz* on September 28, 1994, emerging during interviews with contacts within the Israeli foreign ministry. It is unclear whether it was ever announced publicly or when it disappeared. It does not reappear in subsequent foreign ministry documents or statements. Aluf Benn, ‘בלימה כפולה ועסקים מהצד’, *Haaretz*, 28 September 1994.

³⁴⁰ Peres assigned one of his deputies, Yo’av Biran, to run the new operation.

has ever faced,” and explaining how Iran was a global menace and a destabilizing force for the entire region.³⁴¹

This narrative did not meet with universal acceptance. Skeptics took issue with both the rhetoric and the portrayal of the Iranian threat. Rabin’s concern for Iran generated extensive debate in the military and intelligence establishments, as well as in the academic community. Since analysts had up to that point largely ignored or overlooked Iran as a priority threat, they were entering new policy territory. They recognized that the Iranian military buildup, which was no longer currently preoccupied with waging war, raised troubling questions regarding the regime’s intent.³⁴² Still, not everyone viewed this development as representing a significant threat to Israel.

In particular, military and intelligence officials worried that the increase in the rhetorical intensity portraying Iran as a danger could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Chief among the skeptics was Ehud Barak, who had become IDF Chief of Staff in 1991. He sought to scale back public discussion of the Iranian issue,³⁴³ reportedly instructing his generals to refrain from publicly discussing Iran’s nuclear effort. He feared that speculation about the nature of the program would fuel perceptions of potential risk unsupported by military or intelligence assessments. The annual intelligence assessment for 1993-1994 submitted to the chief of the general staff did not list Iran among the direct threats facing Israel.³⁴⁴

³⁴¹ Benn, ‘בלימה כפולה ועסקים מהצד’.

³⁴² Iran’s few mentions in Israeli strategic assessments before 1992 relate to its conflicts with Iraq. Prior to Rabin taking office, Iran is not discussed as an independent threat.

³⁴³ Barak took over from Lieutenant General Dan Shomron. Upon his departure from the post, Shomron stated that he viewed the growing threat from Iran as possibly one of the major security challenges that Israel would have to face in the years to come. Jerusalem Post Staff, ‘Barak at the Helm’, *Jerusalem Post*, 1 April 1991.

³⁴⁴ Pinkas, ‘A Watchful Eye Widens on a Menacing Neighbor’.

Independent analysts and commentators also expressed doubts about Rabin's Iran rhetoric. One important voice at the time, Ephraim Kam, then a researcher at Tel Aviv University's Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies,³⁴⁵ contradicted many of the assertions of the Labor government based upon a close inspection of Iran's economy and society. Writing in a 1993-94 report, Kam characterized the threat as "of very limited scope and nature."³⁴⁶ He explained that Iran's military had limited technological capability and that without surface-to-surface missiles capable of reaching Israel, Iran could not pose a direct military threat. Importantly, he challenged claims about Iranian intentions. He maintained that Iran perceived itself as facing danger from its immediate neighbors and thus was not concerned with Israel. Moreover, Iran was "a decade away, if at all, from obtaining [nuclear] capabilities."³⁴⁷

Kam's analysis was significant because it examined conditions in Iran rather than simply ascribing motives to its leaders. He saw Iran's serious economic problems and social unrest as motivating Iran's leaders to moderate the nation's foreign policy. He distinguished Iran's nuclear ambitions from those of Iraq, implying that Iran would not be driven to join the nuclear club at any cost. He pointed out that Tehran's investment

³⁴⁵ Kam is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies. He was interviewed by the author on November 2, 2015.

³⁴⁶ The 1993-94 report represented a change from Kam's initial analysis. His report of a year earlier echoed Sneh and Rabin's claims that Iran was a "growing threat to Israel." He pointed to its military buildup, its attempts to influence Islamic movements abroad, and its efforts to obstruct the Arab-Israeli peace process. To Kam, investment of strained economic resources in military applications implied that Iran's leaders sought regional hegemony by sacrificing domestic development. He noted, however, that Iran's leaders emphasized neither their nuclear prowess nor ambitions. One year later, Kam noted that Iran's efforts to build its economy and seek international acceptance had become more compelling than its nuclear ambitions. Shlomo Gazit, *The Middle East Military Balance 1992-1993*, 1 edition (Jerusalem: Routledge, 1994), 33.

³⁴⁷ 'The Middle East Military Balance 1993-1994' (Tel Aviv University: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 1994).

in nuclear development was still far below what it had been under the Shah in the 1970s and 40 percent below Iraq's spending on its nuclear development program.³⁴⁸

Political analysts also challenged Rabin's threat narrative. Dore Gold, who would later become a top advisor to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu,³⁴⁹ penned an editorial in the *Jerusalem Post* challenging the "virtual left-right consensus targeting Iran as one of the major Israeli strategic challenges in the 1990s."³⁵⁰ In his column, entitled "Putting the Iranian Threat in Perspective," he argued that a "military clash between the two countries is not inevitable." Like Ehud Barak, he saw a threat narrative as dangerous because "the talk of the Iranian threat might become a self-fulfilling prophecy." Iran, he reminded readers, takes note of Israeli media, and that a "recent spate of articles in the local press has been filled with lists of Iranian weapons acquisitions." He also agreed with Barak's assessment that, while Tehran's support of terrorism threatens Israel, it "does not at this stage constitute a threat to Israel's civilian rear."³⁵¹

iii. Toward Securitization

Ultimately, the Rabin-Sneh narrative proved salient, most likely because it appeared to win over the skeptics. One prominent public change came from Ehud Barak. Speaking to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee in August 1994, Barak described Iran as Israel's "key threat right now," stressing that it was continuing to pursue a nuclear capability that included developing missiles with sufficient range to

³⁴⁸ Gazit, *The Middle East Military Balance 1992-1993*.

³⁴⁹ At the time, Gold was serving as director of the U.S. Foreign and Defense Policy Project at the Jaffee Center at Tel Aviv University.

³⁵⁰ Dore Gold, 'Putting the Iranian Threat in Perspective', *Jerusalem Post*, 19 February 1993.

³⁵¹ Gold.

reach Israel. He also echoed the Sneh argument that concluding a separate peace with Israel's neighboring Arab states would not mitigate the threat from the periphery.³⁵²

A second official reversal came from former skeptic Uri Saguy, Chief of Israeli Military Intelligence.³⁵³ An October 1994 *Jerusalem Post* profile of Saguy and Ya'acov Ami-Dror, the right-wing head of the research division of military intelligence, described the two men as agreeing on Iran as a serious threat to Israel. The story noted that while the two men opposed one another on most threat assessments and responses, they totally agreed that Iran was a key security concern and a primary driver of the spread of Islamic fundamentalism across the region.³⁵⁴

Together, Barak and Saguy offered a compelling picture of the Iran threat. By juxtaposing Iran's "nuclear capability" with its missile development program, Barak highlighted Israel's vulnerability. By indicating that the threat narrative transcended partisan ideology, Saguy cast the narrative as a significant policy rather than a mere political concern. Moreover, since both messengers were members of the military establishment, they commanded public and media attention. The military is considered one of, if not the most, trustworthy and revered institutions in Israel.

Israel's political leaders now had a fully formed narrative casting Iran as an existential threat. While most Israeli citizens focused on recent Palestinian terrorist attacks and the loud public protests seeking to undermine the Israeli-Arab peace process,³⁵⁵ the Iran threat also secured a place on the political agenda.

³⁵² Herb Keinon, 'Barak: Released Prisoners May Return to Terrorism', *Jerusalem Post*, 31 August 1994.

³⁵³ Interview with Aluf Benn, Email, 6 July 2017.

³⁵⁴ Steve Rodan, 'Dynamic Duo - Part I', *Jerusalem Post*, 14 October 1994.

³⁵⁵ In spring and summer 1995 Rabin was engaged in an intense political battle for the survival of the Oslo Peace Accords, which Israeli and Palestinian hardliners sought to discredit and dismantle.

Israel's narrative both echoed new American concerns and contributed to the emerging United States policy regarding Iran and Iraq. The United States had abandoned balance of power politics in which Iran and Iraq countered one another in favor of a more confrontational approach that relied upon sanctions and threats of force. The Clinton administration called this policy "dual containment." Under pressure from a Republican Congress to take a tougher approach to Iran, President Clinton signed Executive Order 12959 in 1995, which prohibited all U.S. trade with Iran.³⁵⁶ Congress went further and passed the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act dictating harsh penalties for foreign companies doing business in Iran.³⁵⁷ The coincidence of Israel's intensified rhetoric and the United States' sanctions led the Iranian leadership to accuse Israel of pressuring Washington to adopt sanctions.³⁵⁸

Whether Israel had enlisted or joined the United States in a new Iran policy was less important than that the two countries shared a common narrative.³⁵⁹ The threat narrative had several themes, although various interests disagreed on the details. These included: (1) Iran could not be trusted to tell the truth about its development of nuclear capacity, which was not limited to peaceful energy purposes; (2) the timetable for the development of nuclear weaponry was relatively short; (3) Israel would be the target of Iran's deployment of a bomb; and (4) a response against Iran was imperative.

³⁵⁶ According to IMF data, U.S. trade with Iran had been growing steadily since the end of the Iran-Iraq War, leading some to suggest a possible improvement in relations between the two nations; but trade dwindled quickly to near zero following the embargo. IMF Direction of Trade Statistics available at IMF Database: 'IMF Data', IMF, n.d., <http://www.imf.org/en/Data>; Bill Clinton, 'Executive Order 12959: Prohibiting Certain Transactions with Respect to Iran' (1995), <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Documents/12959.pdf>.

³⁵⁷ Benjamin Gilman, 'Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996', HR3107 § (1996), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/104th-congress/house-bill/3107>.

³⁵⁸ Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance*.

³⁵⁹ Iranians generally perceive Israel as controlling American foreign policy toward Iran as the two were frequently in lockstep beginning in the 1990s through recent years.

Iran's insistence that its nuclear program was for civilian purposes enabled the narrators to portray Iran's officials as dishonest. It set the stage for the two countries to argue that Iran would be technologically capable of covertly upgrading its facilities for bomb production. Iran could not credibly contradict a claim regarding its production timetable. The time by which Iran would produce its nuclear weapon would, in subsequent years, be the subject of numerous alarming predictions. Ironically, few would note that all of the prior predictions had proved incorrect.³⁶⁰ A January 1995 article in *The New York Times* headlined "Iran May be Able to Build an Atomic Bomb in 5 years" was one such example.³⁶¹ Prior to its publication, most experts believed that Iran was at least a decade away from weapons production. In offering the accelerated prediction, the story omitted the fact that although Iran had acquired "dual use" technology, it had conducted no tests or taken any overt actions that could confirm it was building a bomb.

While not all experts agreed that Iran would target Israel with its bomb, the importance of this claim to the narrative was that it ascribed indisputable intention to Iran's leaders. Whether or not true, the idea of Israel as the target of Iran's nuclear

³⁶⁰ Predicting that neighboring states would achieve nuclear capabilities was an Israeli habit. In August 1990, Science and Technology Minister Yuval Ne'eman predicted that Iraq would have a nuclear bomb within three years. In April 1991, the *Jerusalem Post* editorialized that "only a few years" separated Algeria from a nuclear weapon. In May 1992, Aharon Levran, a defense analyst and former senior intelligence officer, wrote that "Iran might present the severest nuclear danger in the coming years." In December 1992, Rabin said that Israel could face a ground-to-ground missile threat equipped with non-conventional warheads within 2-7 years. Matthew Seriphs, 'Ne'eman: 'Saddam Could Build N-Bombs in 3 Years"', *Jerusalem Post*, 28 August 1990; Editorial Board, 'The Real Middle East Problem', *Jerusalem Post*, 29 April 1991; Aharon Levran, 'How to Tame the Nuclear Beast', *Jerusalem Post*, 1 May 1992; Douglas Davis, 'Major: Rabin Brings New Source of Hope', *Jerusalem Post*, 10 December 1992.

³⁶¹ Chris Hedges, 'Iran May Be Able to Build an Atomic Bomb in 5 Years, U.S. and Israeli Officials Fear', *The New York Times*, 5 January 1995, <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/01/05/world/iran-may-be-able-build-atomic-bomb-5-years-us-israeli-officials-fear.html>.

ambitions added a sense of urgency. At a minimum, it implied that Iran intended to go to war with Israel. Although this trope would be repeated continuously over the years by politicians and “experts,” it had the least evidentiary support.³⁶² Nearly two decades after the narrative’s introduction, during one of the innumerable debates in which Israel supporters questioned Iran’s willingness to suspend its nuclear program, Dr. Daniel Kurtzer, the S. Daniel Abraham Professor of Middle Eastern Policy Studies at Princeton University and former U.S. Ambassador to Israel and Egypt, summed up the skeptics position: “If Iran developed a bomb, it would not waste it on Israel.”³⁶³

The least defined but most emphatic narrative theme was the imperative for action. What should something more than talk but less than war look like? Hawkish politicians in Israel publicly speculated about the feasibility of a pre-emptive strike on Iran similar to the 1981 Israeli bombing of the Iraqi Osirak reactor.³⁶⁴ To those invested in the threat narrative, nuclear deterrence offered no strategic value since Iran could not be trusted to act rationally, and Israel would not admit to having a nuclear weapon. The imposition of economic sanctions on Iran offered the optics of an immediate response, as well as the opportunity to keep the Iran threat on the policy agenda. American politicians could demonstrate their support for Israel and curry favor with

³⁶² See for example, *Jerusalem Post* editorials “The Iranian Threat” and “Containing Iran” published March 24 and May 2, 1995, respectively. In these two editorials, the authors interpreted Iran’s recent actions as a prelude to war with Israel: The editorial board wrote that once Iran acquires its bomb, “it may be tempted to precipitate an all-out war” against Israel. It also dismissed as “disingenuous” Iran’s claim that it was pursuing “peaceful nuclear energy.” Editorial Board, ‘The Iranian Threat’, *Jerusalem Post*, 24 March 1995; Editorial Board, ‘Containing Iran’, *Jerusalem Post*, 2 May 1995.

³⁶³ Daniel Kurtzer, ‘The Iran Project’ (Panel Presentation, 14 November 2013).

³⁶⁴ Most military experts concluded that an Osirak-type preemptive attack would not work against Iran. The Iranians had learned from the Iraqi mistakes and had spread the various parts of its nuclear program around the country at different locations, locating some in deep underground bunkers to protect against the possibility of air attack from Israel or the United States. Advocates for attack saw this as proof that Iran’s program had a secret weapons component.

Jewish constituents by proposing to toughen sanctions. The United States could exploit consideration of a United Nations resolution to enlist new supporters, indirectly providing Israel with new allies. The problem for Israeli hawks, however, was that the sanctions would not reduce the threat as they described it. They needed to eliminate the threat.

For Israeli officials, crafting a complete narrative to justify putting Iran's nuclear bomb at the top of the list of its security priorities was easier than gaining public traction. The debate over Rabin's Arab peace initiative had turned ugly, with his enemies resorting to inflammatory personal attacks. With the public's attention focused on immediate concerns, it was difficult for the Iran narrative to be heard or to be considered anything other than a distractive ploy. Rabin's assassination by a far-right Jewish extremist on November 4, 1995 did not materially change the narrative.³⁶⁵ When Foreign Minister Shimon Peres succeeded Rabin, he added hawkish flourishes and made more frequent use of the international stage to draw attention to Iran.³⁶⁶

In early 1996, Peres doubled down on the threat narrative by expanding the danger to include Iran's support of "terrorism, fundamentalism, and subversion."³⁶⁷ Calling upon European leaders to stop "flirting" with Iran, he became the first Israeli prime minister publicly to compare Iran to Nazi Germany.³⁶⁸ Significantly, he issued

³⁶⁵ Dan Ephron, *Killing a King: The Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and the Remaking of Israel* (New York ; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 143, 163.

³⁶⁶ Peres had been severely critical of Iran while serving under Rabin. The Labor Party portrayed Iran as religiously fanatic and potentially violent. In 1994, during a joint press conference with the Egyptian Foreign Minister, Peres implied that Ayatollah Khomeini harbored a murderous intent toward Israel. Alon Pinkas, 'Peres: Iran Thinks of Us as a Collective Salman Rushdie', *Jerusalem Post*, 1 September 1994.

³⁶⁷ interview with France 2 television. At the Summit, Peres claimed that Iran was the world's "capital of terror." Government Press Office, 'Peres: We Shall Do All It Takes to Defeat Terrorism', *Jerusalem Post*, 14 March 1996.

³⁶⁸ David Makovsky and Hillel Kuttler, 'Clinton to Head Anti-Terror Summit Next Week', *Jerusalem Post*, 8 March 1996. Peres claimed that Iran was potentially more dangerous than Hitler's Germany since Iran was seeking to acquire nuclear weapons.

these denunciations at a joint anti-terror conference in Egypt, which was officially called the Peacemakers' Summit. Peres' emphasis on Iran's connection with terrorism increased the immediacy of the security threat to Israel. It also added a justification for an active Israeli response. Shortly after the summit, Peres warned the Iranians that Israel would retaliate with air strikes for any terrorist attacks in Israel or against Jewish targets abroad. The Iran threat had now become concrete.

III. The Entrenchment of the Threat Narrative

One indication that the Iran threat narrative had not penetrated public consciousness was its absence from public discourse in the 1996 Israeli national elections between Shimon Peres and Likud challenger Benjamin Netanyahu. There are several explanations for this. To be sure, their disagreement over Labor's pursuit of a peace process with the Palestinians and the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 dominated the election, while they did not materially disagree over the threat posed by Iran. Yet the failure to mention the issue indicated that it remained a concern of the elites. Both men were hawks, but Netanyahu had taken slightly longer to convert.

In his first book, *A Place Among the Nations*, published in 1993, Netanyahu barely mentioned Iran in his rundown of Israel's adversaries. Despite Saddam's defeat in the First Gulf War, he continued to insist that Iraq was the primary nuclear threat in the region. Netanyahu argued that "Saddam's Iraq was, and still is, a menace of the sort that has previously only been the stuff of suspense novels: a terrorist state with a leader seeking to graduate from car bombs to nuclear bombs."³⁶⁹ By 1995, however, Netanyahu had changed his position and adopted Prime Minister Rabin's narrative. He took to the floor of the Knesset to deliver a lengthy speech indicating his agreement

³⁶⁹ Benjamin Netanyahu, *A Place Among the Nations: Israel and the World* (New York: Bantam Dell Pub Group, 1993), 126.

with Rabin's assessment of the Iran threat. Netanyahu colorfully warned of a coming "Islamic wave" that will flow over the Middle East if outside forces do not act swiftly to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons capability.³⁷⁰ The speech was not partisan, and it received validation from Labor member Raanan Cohen, who added that World War II will look like "child's play" in comparison to the "new world war that Iran will lead."³⁷¹

In his second book, published in 1995, Netanyahu devoted a chapter to the looming nuclear crisis.³⁷² While in full agreement with the government's assessment, Netanyahu's discussion raised two notable points. First, he effectively admitted publicly that Israel possessed nuclear weapons when he argued that Iran had become the primary threat to Israel's nuclear monopoly in the Middle East. The admission was also inherent in Netanyahu's questioning the value of relying upon a strategy of deterrence rather than a preemptive strike. He claimed that, "There is no way of knowing whether Iran can be deterred from using its nuclear arsenal, as the Soviet Union was for more than four decades, or whether it would actually be willing one day to plunge the world into the abyss."³⁷³ Additionally, Netanyahu skillfully conflated the issue of terrorism and nuclear weapons. In what he called a catastrophic "best-case scenario," Netanyahu described a situation in which Israel would experience a significant increase in conventional terrorism perpetrated by Iranian-supported groups, who would be protected from Israeli reprisals by Iran's nuclear arsenal.³⁷⁴ In other respects,

³⁷⁰ In his speech Netanyahu chided journalists for their skepticism of Rabin's Iran warnings. He indicated that he unequivocally agreed with the prime minister and that he would not dare to "mock such a significant existential threat" as this. '98th Meeting of the 13th Knesset', 11 January 1995, Knesset Transcripts.

³⁷¹ '98th Meeting of the 13th Knesset'.

³⁷² Binyamin Netanyahu, *Fighting Terrorism: How Democracies Can Defeat Domestic and International Terrorists* (Macmillan, 1995), 121–29.

³⁷³ Netanyahu, 123.

³⁷⁴ This is sometimes referred to as the "nuclear umbrella" scenario.

Netanyahu echoed more familiar themes: Iranian leaders could not be trusted; the intended target of their nuclear weapons program was Israel; and Iran's acquisition of a bomb was imminent. Looking toward the future, he gave Israel less time to deal with the looming Iranian threat than most previous assessments, offering an accelerated timetable claiming that a weapon was only three to five years from completion.³⁷⁵

Notwithstanding their agreement, it is notable that neither candidate in the 1996 elections saw fit to discuss Iran as a looming security threat.³⁷⁶ It is unlikely that their silence was an oversight but rather a reflection of public disinterest. There was no evidence that the public saw the Iran threat as a priority. While a pre-election poll registered voters' concern for terrorism, pollsters did not inquire about voters' attitudes toward Iran, its nuclear program, or their perception of the threat posed by the country.³⁷⁷ Unsurprisingly, Iran did not see the election outcome, in which Netanyahu narrowly defeated Peres, as consequential.³⁷⁸ Iranian media called the two men "two sides of the same coin."³⁷⁹

After his victory Netanyahu revived his Iran narrative. He raised the issue in a visit to the United States seeking to reaffirm the strong Israeli-American partnership. This appeared to be a strategic move with dual purpose. It highlighted the two

³⁷⁵ Netanyahu, *Fighting Terrorism*, 123.

³⁷⁶ Peres accorded Iran a cameo appearance during a debate, which was otherwise dominated by discussion of the Oslo Accords. In claiming that Israel was locked "in a race with fundamentalists," he cautioned that "It will be a disaster if they get the nuclear weapon before we make peace." Netanyahu, who vehemently opposed continuing the peace process and the establishment of a Palestinian State, did not mention Iran. Sarah Honig, 'Netanyahu, Peres Sharpen Debating Skills on "Popolitka"', *Jerusalem Post*, 7 May 1996.

³⁷⁷ In a poll conducted shortly before the election, the vast majority of Israelis said that the issues of "Peace and the Territories" and "Terrorism" would affect their vote "to a great extent." Concerns about Iran were not offered as options. Alan Arian and Michal Shamir, eds., *The Elections in Israel, 1996*, SUNY Series in Israeli Studies (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 8.

³⁷⁸ Netanyahu's margin over Peres in the 29 May 1996 election was 50.5% to 49.5%.

³⁷⁹ 'Iranian Media: No Big Change Whoever Wins Election', *Reuters*, 30 May 1996.

countries' shared concern regarding Iran while overshadowing the United States' opposition to Netanyahu's abandonment of his predecessors' peace initiatives. In a speech to a joint session of Congress, Netanyahu employed remarkably strong language in describing the Iranian regime as "the most dangerous" of the "unreconstructed dictatorships whose governmental creed is based on tyranny and intimidation." Iran, he maintained, is a country that had "wed a cruel despotism to a fanatic militancy," and warned "if this regime, or its despotic neighbor Iraq, were to acquire nuclear weapons, this could presage catastrophic consequences, not only for my country, and not only for the Middle East, but for all mankind."³⁸⁰ Netanyahu's audience extended beyond American politicians. Instilling Israel's fear of Iran in American Jewry enabled him to seek their support for his leadership even among those who disagreed with him on the peace process.

Upon his return from the United States, Netanyahu did not prioritize continued engagement in peace process negotiations.³⁸¹ Instead, he focused his foreign policy pronouncements on Iran by repeating the message he had delivered to American politicians and world Jewry. Curiously, however, as he publicly promoted the idea of a preemptive strike, his allies were exploring a message change toward the Iranians. This new approach held that the Labor government had been too aggressive toward Iran and too soft on Syria.³⁸² As a strategic matter, the focus on Syria enabled Netanyahu to oppose Rabin's peace initiative. Rabin had linked the pursuit of an Arab peace to the

³⁸⁰ Benjamin Netanyahu, 'PM Netanyahu Speech to US Congress' (10 July 1996), <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFA-Archive/1996/Pages/PM%20Netanyahu-%20Speech%20to%20US%20Congress-%20July%2010-%201996.aspx>.

³⁸¹ Netanyahu could not completely abandon the peace process, but he did not pursue it with the same seriousness that the previous Labor government had. His campaign had promoted skepticism, if not outright hostility, to the peace process, so this was to be expected.

³⁸² Steve Rodan, 'PM in DC to Stress Diplomacy, Not Defense Issues', *Jerusalem Post*, 5 July 1996.

Iran threat. By decoupling Iran from peace negotiations with the Arabs, Netanyahu was indicating that his opposition to the peace process was stronger than his conviction about the immediacy of the Iran threat.

It is questionable whether Netanyahu's policy modification was more than a tactical move. The Labor hardliners both noted and attacked his reticence to criticize Iran, pressing him to take a more confrontational approach.³⁸³ Developments in Iran had provided Netanyahu with the opportunity to modify the narrative if he chose to do so. In May 1997, the victory of Mohammad Khatami, an avowed reformer, in Iran's presidential elections surprised the world. A few Israeli officials floated the idea of revising the narrative. For example, days after the election, Minister of Foreign Affairs David Levy claimed in a speech to the Israeli Parliament that "Israel has never determined that Iran is our enemy." He expressed hope for a changed relationship, "We would be very happy to see Iran joining the regional efforts to lesson tension, stop terrorism, and search for ways of cooperation and peace."³⁸⁴ Reports also surfaced that Netanyahu had authorized contacts with the Iranians to investigate the possibility of

³⁸³ The displeasure of Ephraim Sneh illustrated the complexity of the issues on Israel's agenda. For Sneh, Iran remained the primary threat, but he also believed that an alliance with Israel's neighbors was critical for effectively reducing the risk. One of Sneh's more radical proposals called for the formation of an Israeli-Jordanian-Palestinian axis to counterbalance the Syrian-Iranian front. Much later, Sneh recalled Netanyahu's failure to take Iran seriously as a period of immense frustration. Michal Yudelman, 'Sneh: Confrontation with Iran Inevitable', *Jerusalem Post*, 17 February 1997, Daily edition; Interview with Ephraim Sneh.

³⁸⁴ The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) reiterated this statement following the swearing in of Khatami several months later on August 4, 1997. In a communique, the MFA stated that "Israel viewed the electoral victory of President Mohammed Khatami as a sign of moderation." It continued, "The swearing in of President Mohammad Khatami has given Iran an opportunity to open a new page in its relations with all of its neighbors to prove that its new government is inclined toward peace and not confrontation." Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Ministry of Foreign Affairs Communique on Iran's New President', 4 August 1997, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/MFADocuments/Yearbook11/Pages/134%20Ministry%20of%20Foreign%20Affairs%20communique%20on%20Iran.aspx>.

starting a dialogue.³⁸⁵ Israel failed to seize this initiative, however, and in the end ignored the opportunity to modify the narrative of Iran as an Islamic theocracy in the grip of religious clerics committed to the destruction of Israel. Mirroring Iran's response to Israel's election the previous year, Israeli officials concluded that Khatami's victory did not change anything.

In contrast to Netanyahu, the hawks never wavered in their conviction that reconciliation with Iran would be dangerous for Israel. In advance of Khatami's first major international interview on CNN in January 1998, Ephraim Sneh warned Israelis not to put too much stock in what the new president said since it would have no impact on decisions of either Iran's ruling regime or its Supreme Leader.³⁸⁶ Following the interview, Foreign Ministry spokesman Aviv Shir-On added, "We did not find signs of conciliation or a desire for compromise in the Iranian president's words...It does not appear from them that Iran's position has changed."³⁸⁷ Netanyahu used the interview to rebut rumors about pursuing a policy reset. In a speech shortly afterwards, he amplified the nature of Iran's threat to Israel by claiming that since the founding of the state, Israel had never faced a more concrete threat to its existence.³⁸⁸ The speech not only represented a stark

³⁸⁵ This initiative reportedly commenced prior to Khatami's election as part of an economic policy shift. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, in 1996, shortly after Netanyahu took office, Kazakh oil minister Nurlen Balgimbaev contacted the Iranians on behalf of the Israeli government. Israel owed Iran close to \$1 billion from past business dealings and was interested in settling the debt as a means toward resolving military tensions. As a gesture of goodwill, Israel halted broadcasts by opponents of the Iranian regime, which it had been channeling through its Amos satellite. Steve Rodan, 'Iran, Israel Reportedly Forging Contacts', *Jerusalem Post*, 9 September 1997.

³⁸⁶ The election results did not weaken Sneh's criticism of Iran. He still insisted that "The country is based on a fascist, extremist, and racist ideology." Thomas O'Dwyer, 'New Voice from Teheran', *Jerusalem Post*, 9 January 1998.

³⁸⁷ Jay Bushinsky, 'Israel Unimpressed by Khatami's CNN Interview', *Jerusalem Post*, 9 January 1998.

³⁸⁸ Netanyahu spoke at a Knesset State Control Meeting called by Sneh. Abandoning diplomacy, he declared "We are talking about our lives, about our very existence." Batsheva Tsur, 'PM: Iran Poses Most Serious Threat since 1948', *Jerusalem Post*, 27 January 1998.

departure from the carefully phrased diplomatic language of his government ministers, it was also a full-throated return to the rhetoric of the Rabin government.

The vehemence of Netanyahu's rhetoric contrasted sharply with the international optimism that followed Khatami's surprise election. While suspicion of Khatami's ability to effect change was understandable, Netanyahu's decision to adopt the hawks' message about the new Iranian president signaled an unwillingness to explore new possibilities. Israel's right-wing media reinforced this posture by running old news footage of hardline mullahs addressing crowds chanting "Death to Israel." Israel's actions gave Iran no room to change the narrative. Iran continued its nuclear development program, but there was no evidence to suggest that Iran was preparing to attack Israel.³⁸⁹

IV. Lingering Uncertainty

If anyone was watching the entrenchment process of the threat narrative, the election of Khatami would have highlighted the asymmetry in the rhetorical posture of each nation's leaders toward the other. An observer might also wonder how far the fear of Iran's potential nuclear capability had permeated into the consciousness of the Israeli public.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's clerical leaders had included Israel among Iran's enemies, charging it with oppressing Palestinians, illegally occupying Lebanon, and aligning itself with the United States, among other sins. By contrast, since 1993 Israeli leaders had been crafting a narrative focused on instilling fear in Israelis that they were the intended victims of Iran's nuclear weapons development program. The

³⁸⁹ A *Jerusalem Post* editorial captured the Israeli mindset when it asked why Iran would continue to build long-range missiles if not to attack Israel. Editorial Board, 'In the Shadow of the Mullahs', *Jerusalem Post*, 11 January 1998.

continuous repetition of this narrative obscured its inherent problems: did Iran in fact have a weapons program; would it actually use such a weapon; and, as noted by Israeli skeptics when the narrative was first advanced, might it prove to be a self-fulfilling prophecy?

Israelis were entitled to be the most incredulous of Iran's denial that it was pursuing nuclear weapons since Israel never admitted to the open secret that it possessed such weapons. Moreover, there could be no proof or disproof of the ascription of intention to Iran's leaders; and since few Israelis followed Iranian internal affairs, there was no educated debate regarding the claim. Most problematic, however, was whether calls for action against Iran would prompt the latter to escalate a conflict confined predominately to words.

In the final two years of the twentieth century, three developments moved the hostilities beyond the rhetorical, increasing the stakes for both nations. By the century's end, the nature of the Iran threat and Israelis' perception of it remained surprisingly unsettled. The first development was a January 1998 story in the *Jerusalem Post* that claimed the paper had obtained documents definitively proving Iran had successfully acquired several nuclear warheads from Kazakhstan shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union.³⁹⁰ The second was Iran's testing of its first ballistic missile. Finally, political developments in Israel, including the 1999 ouster of Netanyahu as prime minister and the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon the following year, demonstrated the country's vulnerability.

³⁹⁰ The documents were given to the paper by Labor MK Rafi Elul, who claimed to have received them from an exiled Iranian nuclear scientist. He said that both Israel and the United States have "known about this for several years." Steve Rodan, 'MK Elul Says Israel, US Have Known of Iranian Nukes for Years', *Jerusalem Post*, 12 April 1998.

The story in the *Jerusalem Post* appeared credible. It included numerous specifics about the sale, including the price – \$25 million – as well as the details of the smuggling operation through which the warheads reached Iran.³⁹¹ Readers were not informed that the facts largely came from a 1992 Report by the American House of Representatives' Republican Research Committee, which had by then been debunked by various experts.³⁹² Israeli politicians also ignored the veracity of the claims as they insisted, using hyperbolic and fatalistic rhetoric, that the "evidence" validated Israeli fears and justified taking immediate action. Netanyahu castigated the international community for its indifference and suggested that it may already be too late to thwart Iran's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile development.³⁹³

Whether or not intended as provocation, Iran conducted a test of its first ballistic missile on July 22, 1998. It exploded 100 seconds into flight.³⁹⁴ Faced with a proverbial choice between reporting a glass as half-empty or half-full, the Israeli press interpreted the test as largely successful and a harbinger of a dark future. Barry Rubin, a prominent

³⁹¹ The story of the weapons smuggling operation included references to Russian organized crime and Argentinian technicians. Steve Rodan, 'Documents Obtained by "Jerusalem Post" Show: Iran Has Four Nuclear Bombs', *Jerusalem Post*, 9 April 1998; Steve Rodan and Hillel Kuttler, 'Iran Paid \$25m. for Nuclear Weapons, Documents Show', *Jerusalem Post*, 10 April 1998.

³⁹² See discussion of Republican House Research Committee Report, *infra*, Chapter 4.

³⁹³ In a report to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Netanyahu claimed that Israel was doing everything it could to stop Iran without specifying what this meant. Jay Bushinsky and Liat Collins, 'PM: It May Be Too Late to Stop Iran, Iraq Nuclear Plans', *Jerusalem Post*, 9 June 1998.

³⁹⁴ There was some uncertainty at the time about whether the test of the Shahab-3 missile, which was based on the North Korean No Dong missile, was a success or failure. U.S. government officials were unsure if the missile had exploded on its own – an indication of failure – or whether the Iranians had deliberately detonated the missile during its flight. Later assessments pointed toward the former. Iran attempted another test two years later, which again ended in failure. It took nearly five years for Iran to conduct a successful test of the Shahab-3 in June 2003. Gary Samore, *Iran's Strategic Weapons Programmes: A Net Assessment* (Routledge, 2013); Steven Erlanger, 'Washington Casts Wary Eye at Missile Test', *The New York Times*, 24 July 1998, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/24/world/washington-casts-wary-eye-at-missile-test.html>.

Israeli academic and researcher, wrote in an opinion piece that “Iran’s successful launch of a medium-range missile last week makes assessing the Iran issue much more urgent.”³⁹⁵

Although Iran never provided official reasons for the missile test, statements by government officials implied that one motivation was Iran’s fear of a potential Israeli attack. From Iran’s perspective, the test was part of an initiative to enhance its domestic military deterrence capability. Iran, too, could picture itself as a victim of foreign aggression. Iranian Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani voiced such concern in an interview with the Saudi Arabian daily *al-Wasat*, pointing out, “You would notice that no other country has been as bullied or threatened as Iran.” He continued, “Israel, for instance, menaces Iran more than it menaces any other country.” Mohammad Khatami emphasized Iranians’ concern for their safety by noting the salient fact that had largely gone unmentioned, namely that Israel possessed a stockpile of nuclear weapons. This, he claimed, made Israel the foremost threat to regional stability.³⁹⁶

Predictably, Iran’s actions intensified the public rhetoric of Israeli officials, precipitating a war of words. Once again, Ephraim Sneh fired the first verbal salvo by declaring that it was time for Israel to consider a preemptive strike against Iran.³⁹⁷ As a member of the political minority, Sneh was not speaking for the government, which had thus far resisted such a specific proposal. Nevertheless, Sneh intended to elicit a response from Iran that would support his characterization of the country’s leaders as

³⁹⁵ Barry Rubin, ‘Iran’s Threat’, *Jerusalem Post*, 30 July 1998.

³⁹⁶ Douglas Davis, ‘Iran: Military Buildup Is Needed to Counter Israel’, *Jerusalem Post*, 2 August 1998.

³⁹⁷ Jerusalem Post Staff and AP, ‘Iran Unveils Shihab-3 Missile. Has Plans for Longer-Range Model’, *Jerusalem Post*, 27 September 1998.

dangerous.³⁹⁸ He succeeded, but he also provoked significant pushback from Israeli critics.

In response to Sneh, Iranian Defense Minister Ali Shamkhani promised Iran would respond in a “stunning way” if Israel attacked the Iranian nuclear reactor.³⁹⁹ Additionally, however, officials in Netanyahu’s government, who were critical of Iran’s nuclear program, criticized Sneh’s rhetoric as one step too far. For example, Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai called them “redundant and harmful.”⁴⁰⁰ Ephraim Kam resurrected his concern that ill-conceived policies built upon rhetorical rather than evidentiary claims could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.⁴⁰¹ He authored a report explaining how the perception of Iran in Israel was gradually overtaking the reality of the danger it actually posed. As he had in an earlier report, Kam disputed the hawks’ characterization of the threat by arguing that “Iran was a cause for concern, not alarm.” He also criticized Israeli leadership and its willingness to contribute – “not always with excessive wisdom” – to the perception that Iran is a significant enemy. This perception, he warned, will prove difficult to change, especially when so many Israeli leaders have publicly embraced a goal of trying to halt Iran’s weapons’ development efforts. Kam urged Israeli leaders to moderate their tone on Iran to demonstrate that Israel does not regard Iran as a primary enemy.⁴⁰²

Kam’s arguments should have engendered debate among politicians who appeared largely to agree on the Iranian threat, but as he predicted, too many Israeli

³⁹⁸ Recalling this period, Sneh explained that his frustration at Israel’s failure to counter Iranian activities prompted his provocation. Interview with Ephraim Sneh.

³⁹⁹ Liat Collins and Steve Rodan, ‘Mordechai: We Can Protect Our Citizens from Iran Threat’, *Jerusalem Post*, 28 September 1998.

⁴⁰⁰ Collins and Rodan.

⁴⁰¹ See discussion of Ephraim Kam’s previous analysis *infra*.

⁴⁰² Ephraim Kam, ‘The Iranian Threat Cause for Concern, Not Alarm’, Strategic Assessment (Institute for National Security Studies, October 1998).

politicians from different parties had already invested in supporting the narrative.

Despite many policy differences and mounting criticism of Netanyahu, few leaders were willing to risk the political price of disputing the existence of a threat resting on their constituents' fears.

Netanyahu, having collected too many critics, could no longer survive a vote of no confidence, and he was forced to call for elections.⁴⁰³ The Iran nuclear threat did not figure prominently in the issues that caused his downfall and made only cameo appearances in the election campaign.⁴⁰⁴ Once again, the elections evinced that Iran was primarily a concern of Israel's elites. Most citizens focused on the issues closer to home and their daily lives.

Netanyahu lost the election to former IDF Chief of Staff Ehud Barak, who signaled that he did not share his predecessor's fixation on Iran.⁴⁰⁵ Although he did not take the initiative to address the issue, shortly after his victory he responded to a direct question about Israel's Iran policy by stating, "We are for a kind of a very cautious and careful approach to the Iranians."⁴⁰⁶ He then equivocated in responding to a follow up question about what he considered the "main threats" to the existence of Israel. He notably omitted reference to Iran in his reply that Israel lives in a "very tough

⁴⁰³ Opponents disparaged his handling of the economy and the budget. Both proponents and opponents of Palestinian peace talks objected to his handling of negotiations. Many criticized the mounting death toll and Israel's failure to achieve victory in southern Lebanon.

⁴⁰⁴ One such mention concerned Iran's sponsorship of terrorism, particularly its support of Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon. The cost and consequences of Israel's continued occupation was a campaign issue.

⁴⁰⁵ One of Barak's major foreign policy initiatives involved overseeing Israel's hasty withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000, ending eighteen years of Israeli presence in the country.

⁴⁰⁶ As IDF Chief of Staff, Ehud Barak had converted to the hawkish perception of Iran, but he was not an outspoken advocate of greater confrontation. See discussion of Barak's evolving views of Iran *infra*.

neighborhood.” He then pivoted to argue that Israel’s most urgent problem was renewing a stagnant economy.⁴⁰⁷

The Barak government demonstrated its decision not to embrace the Netanyahu-Sneh Iran narrative by its muted reaction to Iran’s second ballistic missile test in July 2000. In a marked contrast to earlier claims that Iran intended to attack Israel, Director General of the Defense Ministry Amos Yaron maintained that Iran’s military development was understandable given their recent history. Choosing empathy over belligerence, he explained that “Iran developed these capabilities as a result of the lessons they had learned from the wars of the past, which is to say from its big war against Iraq. Iran didn’t develop this missile against the State of Israel.”⁴⁰⁸

After barely two years in office, Israeli politics unrelated to Iran brought down the government, forcing Barak to call for new elections.⁴⁰⁹ That year, both Israel and Iran held elections with sharply contrasting outcomes. Barak lost decisively to his Likud challenger, Ariel Sharon, signaling a rightward shift away from Barak’s pragmatism.⁴¹⁰ Iranians re-elected President Mohammad Khatami in a landslide victory, giving him 77%

⁴⁰⁷ ‘Selected Press Statements by PM Barak during His Visit to London’, 23 November 1999, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/1999/Pages/Selected%20Press%20Statements%20by%20PM%20Barak%20during%20his%20V.aspx>.

⁴⁰⁸ David Rudge, ‘Officials: Israel Not Iran’ Immediate Target’, *Jerusalem Post*, 17 July 2000.

⁴⁰⁹ Public dissatisfaction focused on immediate security concerns associated with Israel’s hasty retreat from Lebanon and the outbreak of the Second Intifada. Suzanne Goldenberg, ‘Barak Calls Early Election’, *The Guardian*, 29 November 2000, sec. World news, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2000/nov/29/israel>.

⁴¹⁰ Sharon, a former military commander and Minister of Defense, had stirred controversy on numerous occasions. His provocative visit to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem reportedly provoked the second Palestinian Intifada. World leaders and Arab neighbors suspected his strategic judgment. As defense minister from 1981-1983 under Prime Minister Menachem Begin, Sharon directed Israel’s military operations in Lebanon, which included the massacres at Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. A commission convened to investigate the causes forced Sharon’s resignation by holding him responsible for not taking appropriate measures to prevent violence.

of the vote with 67% voter turnout.⁴¹¹ Sharon had shown little regard for world opinion, while Khatami's reelection suggested Iranians wanted more global reengagement, including the possibility of negotiation and reconciliation with the West. Israelis again refused to acknowledge a change in Iran that might warrant a rethinking of their narrative.⁴¹²

V. Aftermath of September 11, 2001

It is a trite understatement to say that the security profile of the world changed on September 11, 2001, when Sunni Muslim terrorists commandeered airplanes to attack targets in the United States. While the terrorists accorded Israel a relatively minor role in their justification for the attacks – and did not mention Iran – Israel used the occasion to highlight its own insecurity.

The attacks thrust terrorism to the top of the world's threat agenda with the U.S. President's declaration of a "Global War on Terror." If non-state actors could inflict death and destruction in a surprise attack on the United States, no country could feel safe. If the previously unimaginable spectacle of flying airplanes into iconic American buildings could now be imagined, so too could a rogue nation providing nuclear weapons to terrorists willing to use them.⁴¹³ What was a catastrophic event in a large nation could be the cataclysmic destruction of a small state such as Israel. What might Muslim extremists do with a nuclear weapon?

⁴¹¹ 'Iran Data Portal', Iran Data Portal - Syracuse University, n.d., <http://irandataportal.syr.edu/>.

⁴¹² Editorial Board, 'No Win for Democracy in Iran', *Jerusalem Post*, 10 June 2001.

⁴¹³ The United States used questionable intelligence to charge that Saddam Hussein's program for developing weapons of mass destruction justified an invasion of the country. Evidence suggesting development or acquisition of nuclear material subsequently proved false.

In declaring common cause with the United States, Israel sought to enlist American assistance in a more aggressive policy toward Iran. To emphasize the danger of Muslim extremism in a singular concept, Israel had to ignore the distinction between Sunnis and Shias. It also needed the U.S. to recognize Iran as a greater threat than Iraq. To Israel's disappointment, in the aftermath of the attacks, the Americans chose to focus on Afghanistan and Iraq.⁴¹⁴ Moreover, Iran's leaders quietly reached out to the United States to offer assistance in its fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan.⁴¹⁵

Notwithstanding the absence of evidence linking Iran with any of the 9/11 events, Israeli leaders persevered in intensifying the Iran threat narrative.⁴¹⁶ The newly revealed sense of insecurity introduced reasons for fear.⁴¹⁷ It also presented opportunities to capitalize on the strain of anti-Muslim sentiment that was taking root in response to the terrorist attacks amongst listeners who were not yet acquainted with distinctions between Sunnis and Shiites or Arabs and Persians. Former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu undertook a busy schedule of writing and speaking to reinvigorate the Iran nuclear threat narrative, in which he both offered familiar tropes and tried out new ones. He re-imagined the clash of civilizations in which Iran and its allies would "devour the West,"⁴¹⁸ and he warned that a nuclear bomb was far more devastating

⁴¹⁴ Later evidence would show Iraq had nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks.

⁴¹⁵ Iran funded the opposition of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan to the Taliban government.

⁴¹⁶ Some Israeli officials worried that the attacks would distract the United States from more meaningful fights in the region. Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer criticized the U.S. for ignoring threats from Iran and Syria to build a wide coalition against Bin Laden. Gil Hoffman and AP, 'Ben-Eliezer: United States Too Soft on Iran, Syria', *Jerusalem Post*, 16 October 2001.

⁴¹⁷ Politicians from all parties participated in the threat intensification. For example, a leader of Shinui, a centrist liberal Zionist party, penned an opinion piece warning of the start of a new world war noting that "history is repeating itself." Yosef (Tommy) Lapid, 'The Warning', *Jerusalem Post*, 14 September 2001.

⁴¹⁸ Gil Hoffman, 'Netanyahu: World Must Join to Crush Terror', *Jerusalem Post*, 12 September 2001.

than “300 tons of jet fuel.”⁴¹⁹ Depending upon his audience, he compared Iran, Iranian ideology, or its revolutionary movement to Nazism⁴²⁰ or Communism.⁴²¹

Prime Minister Sharon did not leave the narrative formation to Netanyahu, although he focused on Iran as “a center of terror.” Speaking at a press conference alongside British Prime Minister Tony Blair in November, Sharon emphasized the terror threat from Iran and Syria, while expressing support for the new American and British-led campaign to combat global terrorism. He left the criticism of the Western powers to his Defense Minister, Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, who accused the United States and its partners of ignoring the threats from Iran and Syria in building its coalition against Bin-Laden.⁴²²

It is difficult to know whether Netanyahu and Sharon would have succeeded in securitizing the post-9/11 Iran narrative without two unintended contributions by the Iranians. In December 2001, former Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani delivered the annual Al Quds Day⁴²³ lecture at Tehran University. The address largely focused on the traditional themes associated with the formation of the State of Israel and the suffering it caused the Palestinians. He added a single musing about what the Islamic world might do with a nuclear bomb: “If one day, the Islamic world is also equipped with weapons like those that Israel possesses now, then the imperialists’

⁴¹⁹ Benjamin Netanyahu, ‘Dismantle Terror-Supporting Regimes’, *Jerusalem Post*, 14 September 2001.

⁴²⁰ Netanyahu.

⁴²¹ Benjamin Netanyahu, ‘Address to US House Government Reform Committee’ (24 September 2001).

⁴²² In a speech to the Labor Knesset faction, Ben-Eliezer declared that the “message from the Americans isn’t aggressive enough,” since it failed to target Iran, “the greatest threat to the free world today” because of “their potential for obtaining nuclear capability by 2005.” Hoffman and AP, ‘Ben-Eliezer’.

⁴²³ Al Quds (Jerusalem) Day is held annually on the last Friday of the month of Ramadan to express Iranian solidarity with the Palestinian people. It features public events and speeches by prominent political and religious leaders, who denounce the “Zionist Regime” and call for the liberation of Palestine.

strategy will reach a standstill because the use of even one nuclear bomb inside Israel will destroy everything.”⁴²⁴

Not surprisingly, this line caught the attention of Israeli leaders. Although Rafsanjani was no longer a government official and despite the current efforts of elected Iranian government officials to improve relations with the United States and the West, Israelis heard an Iranian admit that a purpose for developing nuclear capability was to target Israel.⁴²⁵ In Israel’s repetition of this admission, Rafsanjani, who had been a founding father of the Islamic Republic, would become a “moderate,” whose thinking was indicative of the “Ayatollahs’” worldview. The Israeli reaction again overlooked salient facts that might have enabled a more accurate interpretation. Rafsanjani was not only out of favor with some members of the clerical establishment,⁴²⁶ but he had also sought to delegitimize Iran’s political and spiritual leadership. One could have seen his provocation as directed at Iran’s rulers rather than Israelis.

A month after the Al Quds Day speech, Iran arguably supplied a second opportunity for Israel to dramatize its narrative when the Israelis seized a cargo ship off its coast, which they alleged was carrying Iranian military equipment to the Palestinian

⁴²⁴ Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, ‘Rafsanjani Qods Day Speech’, 14 December 2001, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iran/2001/011214-text.html>.

⁴²⁵ Foreign Minister Peres’ response was typical. Calling the remarks “bone-chilling,” he claimed that “they leave no room for doubt as to Iran’s inherent hatred for Israel and its declared goal to destroy her.” Jack Katzenell, ‘Peres Protests Iranian Threat to Destroy Israel’, *Jerusalem Post*, 26 December 2001.

⁴²⁶ Rafsanjani’s clashes with the religious conservative establishment dated back to the formation of the Islamic Republic. He had advocated for a system of direct popular voting to ratify the decisions made by the Constituent Assembly, fearing that the cleric-dominated assembly would be too reactionary. Similarly, as President of Iran, Rafsanjani pursued policies of economic liberalization that were opposed by radical religious elements. Likewise, his cabinet with only four of 22 positions filled by clerics, was, according to Daniel Brumberg, “hardly revolutionary.” Ali Rahnema, ‘Ayatollah Khomeini’s Rule of the Guardian Jurist: From Theory to Practice’, in *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*, ed. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam (Cambridge ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), 155.

Authority. In Israeli media accounts, Prime Minister Sharon stood before the seized ship, the *Karine A*, to demonstrate how Iran was an enabler of terrorism working with the Palestinians to “sow...death and destruction throughout the entire world.”⁴²⁷

While most of the West focused on going to war against the perpetrators and alleged sponsors of the 9/11 attacks, the two incidents enabled Israel’s leaders to remind its population, as well as the world, of the danger posed by Iran. By linking nuclear weapons, terrorism, and Israeli victimhood with Iranian words and deeds, Israel made its case for taking action against Iran rather than seeking resolutions of the Palestinian “issue.” Israel was working hard to keep Iran in the public’s consciousness.

Israeli efforts met with success when President George W. Bush included Iran among the members of the “Axis of Evil” in his January 2002⁴²⁸ State of the Union Address to the American Congress. The utterance of this phrase, which would become a defining moment of his presidency and a seminal moment in United States foreign policy, linked Iran with Iraq and North Korea as global threats. President Bush reportedly inserted the reference to Iran at the last minute for strategic reasons, rejecting his advisors’ suggestion that it be removed.⁴²⁹ Whatever his reasons, he had offered Israelis validation of their narrative and leverage in arguing for action.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁷ Arie O’Sullivan, ‘Sharon: Arafat Is Our “bitter Enemy.” Calls Iran “Spearhead of International Terror.”’, *Jerusalem Post*, 7 January 2002.

⁴²⁸ George W. Bush, ‘State of the Union’ (29 January 2002), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/sou012902.htm>.

⁴²⁹ According to Peter Baker, Iran was added to the text to deflect attention away from the possibility of war with Iraq. Several Bush advisors suggested removing it since there were indications of reform taking place under Khatami, but Bush insisted it remain. Peter Baker, *Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House* (New York: Anchor, 2014).

⁴³⁰ Shortly after the Axis of Evil speech, Israeli officials, citing reports that Jordan’s King Abdullah had uncovered a secret Iranian plot to attack Israel using its proxies Hamas and Islamic Jihad, called upon all “reasonable” Western countries to sever ties with the Iranian regime. Iranian officials denied the reports. Arie O’Sullivan, ‘Jordan’s Abdullah Exposes Iranian Plot to Attack Israel’, *Jerusalem Post*, 6 February 2002.

VI. Conclusion: Image or Imagination

This chapter's examination of the intensifying enmity between Israel and Iran reveals two features of the process by which one nation, Israel, invested in a foreign policy based upon the characterization of the other, Iran, as an existential threat. On one hand, the hostile relationship seemingly had all the elements to achieve securitization, including historic religious enmity, comparisons to a Nazi regime that had committed the greatest crimes against humanity in recent memory, and location in a geographic region beset by chaos and intrigue. Its principal arguments invoked emotional themes ascribing destructive intentions to leaders, who would imminently possess nuclear weapons. Yet the issue failed to penetrate public discourse beyond elite discussion. In other words, it did not achieve full securitization as an existential threat that dictated policy decisions during the first decade of narrative development from 1993 to 2002. On the other hand, this study illustrates that it is often events beyond the control of the parties involved in the narrative which can ultimately affect the "success" of the securitization process.

Although the securitization process in this study concerns the conduct of nations toward one another and the impact of world events, we learn two lessons about the role of human behavior. First, in addition to the role of emotion, a concomitant feature of securitization is ignorance. For a threat that is evidently apparent and lacks immediacy, narrative resonance depends upon the inability to verify the factual predicate of the claimed danger and the credulousness of the listeners. Second, where the securitization process unfolds amidst global uncertainty, the narrative arc is never inevitable. The securitizing actor plays a critical role. His motives, credibility, and political acumen, among other human characteristics, will affect the interpretation of

information and the manner of presentation to his audience. Securitization is a process directed by humans to other humans.

Thus, acceptance by Israelis and world leaders of Iran as an existential threat was neither a foregone conclusion nor an inconsequential myth. The narrative did not emerge from a linear development process in which Israeli leaders consistently constructed a case for acting to eliminate Iran's danger. Most often the accusations were not coordinated with specific action strategies. The nature of the confrontation between the foes was also asymmetrical: Israeli leaders were far more threatened by Iran than Iranians were concerned about Israeli actions. In the early years, some Israelis even worried that Israel's accusatory rhetoric could produce a self-fulfilling prophecy that might compel Iran to engage in threatening actions.

The examination of the consequential historical events in this chapter shows how at key inflection points Israeli officials interpreted facts and addressed the uncertainties to fashion an image of Iran intent on ending Israel's existence. They brought to their narrative their imagination – informed by personal experience, bias, and ambition – thereby creating an image that relied less on fact-based scenarios than on the narrators' interpretations of their chosen facts.

The identity of the narrators, their positions in society, and how they located Israel in the Middle East, as well as their view of global politics, affected their capacity to secure widespread concern over Iranian actions and intentions. Significantly, in the public discourse about Iran, expertise on Iran's politics, governance, or military strategy was in short supply and frequently took a back seat to political considerations. In most cases, even if Iran's actions could arguably be interpreted as weapons development, there was no definitive evidence that Iranian leaders intended to target Israel. Interestingly, few Israelis noticed when their leaders' dire predictions that the

completion of Iran's bomb building was imminent proved wrong. The predicted timetable kept shifting, but the fear of Iran's imminent deployment of a nuclear weapon did not. There is no evidence that Iran's effort to build a bomb ever moved beyond the basic planning stages.

While there were occasional mentions of preemptive attacks and efforts to enlist countries in sanctioning Iran, the confrontation between Israel and Iran was largely rhetorical. Few spoke publicly about regime change or destruction of the nuclear infrastructure, and even fewer believed such efforts would succeed. Yet, if Israel's narrative was to be believed, the threat would only end with the destruction of Iran's nuclear capability *and* the elimination from government of those intent on destroying Israel.⁴³¹

It is ironic that the attacks on September 11, 2001 contributed so substantially to the securitization of the Iran threat narrative since Iran had no part in those events. Whether the continuous repetition of the Iran threat narrative by Israeli officials to a primarily domestic constituency would have, without the increased volume created by the attacks, achieved acceptance among the polity is a counterfactual that need not be considered. The post 9/11 climate of fear enabled Israeli officials to adapt their narrative, and thus, to raise the profile and immediacy of the Iranian threat both at home and abroad. Portraying Iran as a "center of terrorism" cast it as an enemy in the new Global War on Terror. The U.S. President conferred membership on the country in his Axis of Evil. With Israelis and the world fearing Iran's support of terrorism, all that remained to was to imagine Iran as a nuclear-armed global menace, one that no country

⁴³¹ This was Israel's implicit objective in seeking securitization. To take such extraordinary action required acceptance of the Iran threat by both Israel's polity and the global powers.

in the world could ignore. And yet, as we will see, the acceptance of such a narrative was not inevitable.

Chapter Four: Securitization, Part II

I. Introduction: The Threat of Diplomacy

When Benjamin Netanyahu arrived to address the United Nations General Assembly in October 2015, he had a specific agenda. Three months earlier, after years of negotiations, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany (P5+1)⁴³² reached an agreement with Iran. The latter agreed to limit its nuclear program in exchange for relief from economic sanctions. Netanyahu had vociferously opposed the idea of negotiations and now came to denounce the agreement. He believed that Iran was misleading the world and that the P5+1 were naively being led into a disastrous deal negotiated in bad faith with an immoral partner.

Netanyahu was incensed by the details of the deal, known formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or, more commonly, as the “Iran deal” or the “nuclear deal.” It placed strict limits on Iran’s nuclear enrichment capabilities, restricted the number of centrifuges, and imposed a threshold on the amount of enriched uranium present in the country at any one time.⁴³³ It provided for enforcement through rigorous inspection and oversight by international watchdog authorities, led by the IAEA. In exchange, Iran would receive relief from harsh economic sanctions that had crippled its economy.⁴³⁴ Although not written into the agreement but perhaps more importantly, the deal would afford Iran an opportunity after decades of isolation to rejoin the world community as an active economic and diplomatic participant.

⁴³² The Permanent Five members of the United Nations Security Council are the United States, Russia, China, France, and Great Britain.

⁴³³ ‘Full Text of the Iran Nuclear Deal’, 14 July 2015, <https://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/documents/world/full-text-of-the-iran-nuclear-deal/1651/>.

⁴³⁴ Sanctions relief covered only nuclear-related sanctions; it excluded those relating to human rights or terrorism-related conduct.

Netanyahu's opposition predated the agreement. He had opposed exploring the possibility of negotiations with Iran. He had preferred a preemptive military strike to halt Iran's development and reportedly had been on the brink of ordering such an action three years earlier.⁴³⁵ He settled for rhetorically attacking his allies, including the United States, while joining with Israel's historic enemies to oppose a diplomatic solution. Based upon their shared distrust of Iran, Israel and Sunni Arab states opened new channels of communication. They shared the view that any deal with Iran would only embolden the Islamic Republic in its quest for regional hegemony and create a new global menace.

In his speech, Netanyahu spared no aspect of the deal and nobody involved in it from his criticism. He employed inflammatory imagery and rhetorical flourishes in methodically attacking the terms, the negotiators, the signatories, and those who credulously celebrated the accord as a triumph of international diplomacy. He claimed that the Iranian character precluded their acting in good faith and adhering to the terms of the agreement. According to Netanyahu, Iran was as methodical as it was maniacal; its goals were simultaneously chaotic and focused; it posed an existential threat to Israel; and it endangered global peace and prosperity.⁴³⁶

Netanyahu began his address by warning his audience to "check your enthusiasm at the door," which set the stage for his dark remarks. He employed familiar tropes and added some new ones. As he had in many previous speeches, he invoked the memory of the Holocaust as an overarching theme, telling the world leaders, "And now, another

⁴³⁵ Ben Brumfield and Oren Liebermann, 'Israeli Leaders Planned Attack on Iran Military', CNN, 22 August 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/08/22/middleeast/israel-plan-iran-military-target-strike/index.html>.

⁴³⁶ Benjamin Netanyahu, 'PM Netanyahu's Speech at the United Nations General Assembly' (1 October 2015), <http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Speeches/Pages/speechUN011015.aspx>.

regime has arisen, swearing to destroy Israel.”⁴³⁷ Netanyahu warned the Assembly that the missiles Iran is building are not only for Israel, but for Europe and America as well. Iran was engaged in a war of civilizations and developing a nuclear program “for raining down mass destruction – anytime, anywhere.”⁴³⁸

The most unconventional element of his speech came half-way into his address when Netanyahu unexpectedly paused for forty-four seconds. He stood at the podium staring out at the audience, which sat in total silence. Apparently, he intended this moment to be symbolic of the lack of objections to Iran’s promises to murder the Jewish people, another reference to the Holocaust. Netanyahu also employed a form of plain speaking, which was unusual for such a formal address. Invoking cultural stereotypes, he used “mullahs” as a pejorative catch-all for Iran’s leadership and indicated that they were intent on deception. Iran, he insisted, must not be allowed to sweep its violations “under the Persian rug.”⁴³⁹ He ended with a breathtaking flourish in which he positioned Israel as the world’s last line of defense against Iran, and the world’s savior: “Ten miles from ISIS, a few hundred yards from Iran’s murderous proxies, Israel stands in the breach – proudly and courageously defending freedom and progress. Israel is civilization’s front line in the battle against barbarism...Ladies and Gentlemen, stand with Israel because Israel is not just defending itself. More than ever, Israel is defending you.” In the 42-minute speech, he had mentioned Iran 67 times.

The tropes invoked in the New York speech had been years in development, but the position in which Netanyahu found himself was new. He had crafted his narrative during his first term as prime minister and polished the tropes in the preceding six years of his second term of service. Yet Netanyahu’s address highlighted the divergence of the

⁴³⁷ Netanyahu.

⁴³⁸ Netanyahu.

⁴³⁹ Netanyahu.

goals he had pursued in promoting his narrative. When initially crafting his narrative, he sought to convince Israelis to fear Iran. While he wavered on solutions, he sought to capitalize on their sense of insecurity by urging support for his leadership and foreign policies. At the same time, he sought to convince world leaders that they should support his case against Iran. By the time of the 2015 speech, he could emphasize that he had the support of the Israeli public, but he stood in opposition to the member nations of the Security Council and Germany.

In Israel, Netanyahu had succeeded in convincing the “vast majority” of Israelis to oppose the deal. An August 2015 poll showed that 72.7% of Israelis agreed with Netanyahu that Iran posed an “existential threat” to Israel.⁴⁴⁰ In that same survey, a substantial majority of respondents expressed doubt that Iran would abide by the terms of the accord. A mere 16.8% had expressed confidence that Iran would uphold its end of the bargain. That worked out to five out of six Israelis distrusting Iran. At the same time, the major world powers, many of them Israel’s allies, did not subscribe to his narrative.

An objective analyst could be excused for being confused by the vehemence and intemperance of Netanyahu’s opposition. The overwhelming majority of nuclear experts agreed that the terms of the deal effectively made it impossible for Iran to produce a nuclear weapon for at least the next decade.⁴⁴¹ Moreover, it imposed the most sophisticated monitoring mechanisms devised to date, thus minimizing Iran’s ability to cheat. Finally, Iran would face severe sanctions for violating the agreement’s terms,

⁴⁴⁰ 42.5% said they “strongly agreed” with the Prime Minister. Ephraim Yaar and Tamar Hermann, ‘The Peace Index’ (The Israel Democracy Institute, August 2015), http://www.peaceindex.org/files/Peace_Index_Data_August_2015-Eng.pdf.

⁴⁴¹ Additionally, experts agreed the agreement extended Iran’s “break-out time,” the minimum amount of time needed by Iran to gather the materials necessary to build one nuclear weapon, from several months to at least a year. Richard Stone, ‘Technical Elements of Iran Deal Put the Brakes on Nuclear Breakout’, *Science*, 3 April 2015, <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2015/04/technical-elements-iran-deal-put-brakes-nuclear-breakout>.

including the “snap back” of the harsh economic sanctions that had helped bring Iran to the negotiating table.⁴⁴² There was also an implied threat of military action if Iran abrogated the deal. The agreement thus insured that, at least for the foreseeable future, Israel would remain the sole nuclear-armed power in the region.⁴⁴³

To be sure, Iran would still be Israel’s enemy. The country was not a benign neighbor, but a strategic threat to nations in the region. It possessed a large military force and units operating efficiently and effectively to facilitate attacks on foreign soil.⁴⁴⁴ Israel was a target of terrorist groups funded and supplied by Iran, including the Lebanese Hezbollah, which controlled the territory along Israel’s northern border. Iran still had hardline leaders in its government and prominent politicians espousing anti-Israel messages, including the Supreme Leader.

By any objective criteria, the nuclear deal did nothing to increase the Iranian threat to Israel. Using conventional measures, Iran could not match Israel’s military

⁴⁴² The impact of economic sanctions on Iran’s willingness to negotiate is unclear. Skeptics note that Iran began negotiating about the fate of its nuclear program before imposition of additional harsh sanctions. Others argue that the sanctions merely exacerbated Iran’s structural economic problems due to mismanagement, corruption, and lack of transparency. Proponents of sanctions, including the Israelis, believed that sanctions had effectively crippled the Iranian economy and forced nuclear concessions. They maintain that removing sanctions prematurely reduced pressure on a regime that might have been nearing collapse. Academic and policy centers continue to debate the efficacy of sanctions. See, for example, Hossein Mousavian, ‘It Was Not Sanctions That Brought Iran to the Table’, *Financial Times*, 19 November 2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/8d9631f4-510c-11e3-b499-00144feabdc0>; Mark Dubowitz and Reuel Marc Gerecht, ‘Economic Regime-Change Can Stop Iran Bomb’, *Bloomberg*, 17 January 2012, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2012-01-17/economic-regime-change-can-stop-iran-commentary-by-gerecht-and-dubowitz>.

⁴⁴³ Israel has never acknowledged the production of nuclear weapons, although it is widely assumed to possess several hundred such weapons. The U.S. Secretary of State put the number at 200 in a 2015 leaked email, adding they were “all targeted on Tehran.” Colin Powell, ‘Re: Re’:., 3 March 2015, <https://www.scribd.com/document/324033115/00002715-002>.

⁴⁴⁴ In particular, the Quds Force – a special division of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) – operated abroad in conjunction with terrorist organizations. The combat exploits attributed to its commander, Major General Qassem Suleimani, symbolized both the competence and mystery of Iranian military operations in the region.

advantages. Iran's military budget paled in comparison to Israel, as well as all its regional rivals, including Saudi Arabia.⁴⁴⁵ Both the Saudis and Israelis enjoyed close relations with the Americans, with their nations being among the top global recipients of military funds and equipment from the United States. Historical precedent suggested that such support would increase as compensation or inducement for allowing Iranian sanctions relief. Moreover, for the present and foreseeable future, Iran would be unable to focus much attention on Israel. It was effectively tied up in Syria's bloody civil war, where its Quds Force and its Lebanese client Hezbollah were engaged in maintaining the reign of Syrian president Bashar Al Assad. Iran could do little more to challenge Israel than occasionally conduct a missile test or issue a provocative statement.⁴⁴⁶ These realities, combined with the terms of the nuclear agreement, threatened to seriously challenge the Iranian threat narrative that Netanyahu had so assiduously crafted and advanced over the years.

This chapter and the next examine how Netanyahu arrived at the moment in 2015 where he attacked his international allies for supporting a deal that by any objective measure blocked Iran's capacity to produce a nuclear weapon. At the same time, he convinced a majority of the Israeli people to fear Iran as an existential threat. This chapter details how two post-September 11 events, namely the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Iran's president and the 2006 Lebanon War, contributed to

⁴⁴⁵ In 2015, Iran's military spending was less than Israel's both in terms of dollar value and in percentage of GDP. Iran spent approximately \$10.6bn (2.98% of GDP) while Israel spent \$16.9bn (5.66% of GDP). Compared to Saudi Arabia, the difference was even larger. The Saudis spent \$87.2bn (9.85% of GDP). 'SIPRI Military Expenditure Database', Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2015, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

⁴⁴⁶ For example, in 2016 Iran reportedly tested a missile with "Israel must be destroyed" written on it in Hebrew. This test itself can be interpreted in a variety of ways, including as a hardliner attempt to undermine Rouhani's implementation of the nuclear deal, or to deter Israel from attacking Iran's military installations.

the popularization, and thus, the full securitization, of the Iran threat narrative. It is counterfactual speculation as to whether without these two developments there would have been sufficient support to sustain Iran as a securitized issue on the Israeli agenda. Admittedly, Iran's nuclear development program and the prospect that the country could acquire the capacity to produce a nuclear weapon was cause for deep concern. Nevertheless, as discussed in the previous chapter, there is evidence that the initial fear expressed by Israeli leaders, with media support, did not induce the same fear in the public. Ahmadinejad's rhetorical threats to Israel and the Second Lebanon War events intensified the power and durability of the threat narrative. Consequently, these events profoundly affected public perception. Eventually, they would also occasion a change in the public's political understanding, notably leading Israelis to question the capability of their leaders to respond to their fears. Benjamin Netanyahu would recognize this breach and, using a populist strategy, offered his leadership as a response to the looming dissatisfaction.

To set the stage for this discussion, I begin with a look back at the development of Iran's nuclear program, beginning with its origins under the Shah's regime. I then examine the impact of the 2003 United States invasion of Iraq. From there, I turn to an in-depth analysis of how the election of Ahmadinejad contributed to the salience of the Iran threat narrative.⁴⁴⁷ Finally, I look at how the second Lebanese War strengthened the narrative while eventually weakening the Israeli government. In the end, the Israeli public accepted Iran as an existential threat and embraced the return of Netanyahu to the leadership of their country.

⁴⁴⁷ The following chapter continues the discussion by examining how the concurrence of Netanyahu's election as prime minister and Ahmadinejad's re-election enhanced the resonance of Netanyahu's populist messaging.

II. Iran's Nuclear History

A. The Dawn of the Nuclear Age

The world witnessed the destructive force of nuclear weapons when the United States dropped bombs on Japan to end World War II.⁴⁴⁸ Since that time, select countries sought to increase the deadly capability of such weapons while most of the world searched for ways to deter their development and use. Even as scientists developed their nuclear weapons' technology during World War II, they worried about the destructive impact of their invention. After the war, political movements and civic activists publicized and politicized the fears, and public culture reflected the concerns.

⁴⁴⁹ A paradigmatic 1964 film, *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, imagined a rogue bomber crew triggering a nuclear apocalypse that the world's bumbling leadership was powerless to prevent.⁴⁵⁰

As world leaders negotiated agreements to limit and destroy nuclear weapons, the public discourse and imagination concerning their threat abated. The dissolution of the Soviet Union ended the superpowers' nuclear standoff policy of mutually assured destruction but raised concerns about the fate of the Russian nuclear arsenal, as well as the employment opportunities for scientists. Officials and analysts worried about a

⁴⁴⁸ The United States' dropping of two atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 remains the only wartime deployment of such weapons. They killed approximately 130,000 people, mostly civilians, while many more eventually succumbed to cancer. The decision remains controversial.

⁴⁴⁹ Concerns over the destructive force of nuclear weapons eventually led to the creation of various agencies and treaties designed to limit the proliferation of such weapons, including the International Atomic Energy Agency in 1957 and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968.

⁴⁵⁰ Popular culture heightened the public's fear of nuclear weapons. For example, over 100 million people and President Ronald Reagan watched a 1983 made-for-TV film, *The Day After*, which portrayed a fictional nuclear war between NATO and the Soviet Union. Simon Braund, 'How Ronald Reagan Learned to Start Worrying and Stop Loving the Bomb', *Empire*, 1 November 2010, <https://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P3-2307407461.html>.

market for nuclear material, technology, and weapons experts, which could allow rogue national leaders, terrorist organizations, and nations to acquire nuclear capacity.⁴⁵¹

The development of nuclear technology as an energy source complicated non-proliferation efforts. In addition to the risk of catastrophic accidents, a state could disguise a weapons program by appearing to build a nuclear power plant. This also provided cover to the leader of a poor nation who sought to enhance his standing by acquiring a nuclear weapon. He could justify the commitment of scarce resources to the costly venture by claiming that it would provide vital energy. Leaders might also convince their citizens that nuclear capability is a source of national pride as well as a deterrent of enemy hostile actions.⁴⁵²

B. Nuclear Technology in the Middle East

Just in case Saddam Hussein had not raised enough controversy, he posed additional problems when he decided to invest in a nuclear program and to brag about it. In doing so, he demonstrated the risk associated with his strategy. In 1981, in a surprise bombing attack, Israel destroyed Iraq's nearly completed nuclear reactor at Osirak. Israeli leaders reasoned that Saddam Hussein with nuclear weapons posed an existential threat to their nation.⁴⁵³ Although world powers, including the United States,

⁴⁵¹ Andrew Rosenthal, 'SOVIET DISARRAY; U.S. Fears Spread of Soviet Nuclear Weapons', *The New York Times*, 16 December 1991, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/16/world/soviet-disarray-us-fears-spread-of-soviet-nuclear-weapons.html>.

⁴⁵² See, for example, North Korea state propaganda in which the development of nuclear weapons is portrayed as a source of national pride and strength.

⁴⁵³ Subsequent studies question the accuracy of Israel's assessment of the Iraq danger as well as its claim of success. See Dan Reiter, 'Preventive Attacks Against Nuclear Programs and the "Success" at Osiraq', *The Nonproliferation Review* 12, no. 2 (1 July 2005): 355–71; Colin H. Kahl, 'An Israeli Attack against Iran Would Backfire — Just like Israel's 1981 Strike on Iraq', *Washington Post*, 2 March 2012, sec. Opinions, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/an-israeli-attack-against-iran-would-backfire--just-like-israels-1981-strike-on-iraq/2012/02/28/gIQATOMFnR_story.html.

publicly condemned the action, many nations benefitted from the setback to Saddam's nuclear ambitions. They understood that Saddam would continue to defy international behavioral and legal norms governing use of unconventional weapons. During the Iran-Iraq War he had used poison gas against civilian populations. When the war ended, he still retained a powerful military. No one familiar with the Middle East believed he could be counted on to act rationally in his own or his country's best interest.

Israel's development of nuclear weapons provides a contrasting example. It has never admitted to possessing such weapons although it is widely believed to have them.⁴⁵⁴ Notably, the nation is not among the 190 signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that took effect in 1970.⁴⁵⁵ Moreover, it eschews the Cold War strategic doctrine of mutually assured destruction, and thus pursues a policy of keeping all other nations in its neighborhood from obtaining nuclear weapons.

C. Iran's Nuclear Program: Ego, Ambivalence, and Ascription

Despite Israel's desire for a nuclear monopoly in the Middle East, Iran's initial development of nuclear power did not register in Israel as a threat. Iran had launched its program with the assistance of the United States in 1957. Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with the Eisenhower Administration, under

⁴⁵⁴ Israel disguised its weapons development. According to Walter Pincus, Israeli officials told U.S. Embassy personnel in June 1960 that the nuclear reactor it was building with French help was a "textile plant," later revising that to a "metallurgical research installation." Israel's accusations of Iranian activity reflects Israel's prevarications about its weapons program. Walter Pincus, 'Another Nation Blazed the Trail for Iran in Developing a Nuclear Program', *Washington Post*, 9 March 2015, sec. National Security, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/another-nation-blazed-the-trail-for-iran-in-developing-a-nuclear-program/2015/03/09/0222ec28-c41c-11e4-ad5c-3b8ce89f1b89_story.html.

⁴⁵⁵ Non-nuclear armed signatories to the NPT commit to refraining from acquiring nuclear weapons while nations possessing weapons agree to move toward disarmament. It allows signatory nations to develop and operate a peaceful nuclear program within guidelines for non-proliferation. Along with Israel, other non-signatories to the NPT include nuclear-armed India, Pakistan, and North Korea.

which the U.S. assisted Iran in constructing a five-megawatt nuclear reactor in Tehran.⁴⁵⁶

Later, the Shah sought to enhance Iran's nuclear capacity with the construction of a second, much larger reactor near the town of Bushehr, although this project would not be completed before his downfall.⁴⁵⁷

The Shah maintained his nuclear ambitions throughout the 1960s and 1970s. He made no secret of his desire to build more capacity and to obtain a membership in the exclusive nuclear-nations club. Significantly, he met domestic resistance from opponents who strongly criticized his misplaced priorities in diverting resources from the country's other needs, particularly since he already possessed a large, well-trained, and well-equipped military.⁴⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the Shah continued to press the American government for more nuclear technology and expert assistance while sending dozens of Iranian students to the United States to study nuclear engineering. Although Iran had signed the NPT in 1970, under which it agreed to restrictions on its nuclear development, including forswearing acquiring nuclear weapons, American intelligence officials questioned the Shah's intentions. One major skeptic was President Jimmy Carter, who, after assuming office in 1977, voiced his concern that the Shah aimed to

⁴⁵⁶ The Tehran reactor project was part of Eisenhower's "Atoms for Peace" program, which aimed to provide countries with civilian nuclear technology to prevent them from pursuing military nuclear development. Steve Inskeep, 'Born In The USA: How America Created Iran's Nuclear Program', *Parallels* (National Public Radio, 18 September 2005), <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/09/18/440567960/born-in-the-u-s-a-how-america-created-irans-nuclear-program>.

⁴⁵⁷ Construction on the Bushehr reactor began in 1975 but halted shortly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The vacant site was bombed by Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. Reconstruction of the plant began in 1995 with help from Russia. The plant went online in September 2011. Ali Vaez, 'Waiting for Bushehr', *Foreign Policy*, 12 September 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/09/12/waiting-for-bushehr/>.

⁴⁵⁸ The Shah's proclivity for military might was well-known among American and Israeli officials. He spent considerable sums on arms purchases and military training from the United States and Israel, much of it unnecessary from a strategic point of view. According to rumor, he built the largest fleet of hovercrafts in the world. Andrew Scott Cooper, *The Oil Kings: How the U.S., Iran, and Saudi Arabia Changed the Balance of Power in the Middle East* (Simon and Schuster, 2011), 141.

build an atomic bomb.⁴⁵⁹ A nuclear weapons program fit the Shah's self-image: It would both secure Iran's place in the top tier of the global power structure while drastically altering the balance of power in the region.

When Ayatollah Khomeini assumed the leadership of Iran following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, he suspended Iran's nuclear program.⁴⁶⁰ He claimed that it was a waste of resources and an immoral pursuit of the excesses of the West. He allowed the Bushehr reactor to sit empty. Even after the Iraqi invasion of Iran, Khomeini resisted the pleas from officers in the IRGC to reconsider his position on nuclear development. Iran's enemies suspected, however, that the ban would not last, and Iraqi forces went so far as to bomb the empty Bushehr site as a precautionary measure.

Khomeini did reverse his prohibitory edict eventually, but his reasons for doing so remain unclear. Facing power shortages occasioned by the war with Iraq, Khomeini allowed work on Iran's nuclear infrastructure to restart, but he reportedly resisted his advisors' urging to adapt the nuclear program for possible military applications. Despite the presence of Iraqi soldiers in Iranian territory and the use by Saddam of non-conventional chemical weapons against Iranians, including civilians, Khomeini maintained that nuclear weapons violated Islamic jurisprudence.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁹ 'The Nuclear Vault: The Iranian Nuclear Program, 1974-1978', National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book (George Washington University, 12 January 2009), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb268/>. e

⁴⁶⁰ According to Mohsen Rafighdoost, a close confidant of Khomeini during the early years of the Islamic Republic, the Supreme Leader explicitly rejected his advisors' recommendations to develop chemical and nuclear weapons. Gareth Porter, *Manufactured Crisis: The Untold Story of the Iran Nuclear Scare* (Charlottesville, Virginia: Just World Books, 2014); Gareth Porter, 'When the Ayatollah Said No to Nukes', *Foreign Policy* (blog), 16 October 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/16/when-the-ayatollah-said-no-to-nukes/>.

⁴⁶¹ Khomeini's successor as Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, reportedly issued a more explicit fatwa in the 1990s continuing the ban on weapons of mass destruction. Since Iran did not disclose its existence until 2004 it could not influence the perceptions of Iran's nuclear weapons intentions. Even after its disclosure, which did not include producing the document, critics remained skeptical about its legitimacy. They

To be sure, there were reasons for skepticism about Iran's intentions. Its work on developing the nuclear fuel cycle and expanding capacity allowed for "dual use" as both energy and weapons production. Moreover, by creating the perception of technological advancement in nuclear proficiency, Iran could develop the intellectual capability to build a weapon should it choose to do so. Still, throughout the 1980s Israeli leadership appeared largely unconcerned about Iran's nuclear activities. Only once did someone refer to Iran's nuclear program in public debate.⁴⁶² A transcript of a Knesset discussion about French arms sales to Saudi Arabia mentions that France had sold nuclear materials to Iran.⁴⁶³ Review of the Israeli Foreign Ministry Historical Documents archive between 1984 and 1992 reveals that Israeli politicians had two primary concerns about Iran: the plight of Iranian Jewry and the strategic value of arms sales during the Iran-Iraq War.⁴⁶⁴ The specter of a nuclear-armed Iran was not part of Israel's public discourse.

Israelis, however, did believe that Iraq and its unpredictable leader posed a threat to Israel's security. This fear proved warranted when Iraq launched ballistic missiles at Israeli targets to expand its 1990 invasion of Kuwait into a regional conflict.⁴⁶⁵

questioned whether Iran would sincerely resist acquiring nuclear weapons based on Islamic principles, or whether the announcement was a tactical ploy designed to deceive Western negotiators. Porter, 'When the Ayatollah Said No to Nukes'.

⁴⁶² This is not to say that the Israeli media did not discuss the issue, or that Iran was never mentioned by Israeli officials, only that Iran's nuclear policy was not discussed publicly in an official government capacity in the Israeli Knesset during this period.

⁴⁶³ A December 24, 1986 Knesset transcript mentioned the sale of French materials to Iran, but discussion quickly turned to concern about French arms sales to Saudi Arabia. '272nd Meeting of the 11th Knesset', 24 December 1986, Knesset Transcripts.

⁴⁶⁴ 'Israel's Foreign Policy - Historical Documents', Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d., http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/FOREIGNPOLICY/MFADOCUMENTS/Pages/Documents_Foreign_Policy_Israel.aspx.

⁴⁶⁵ Israel had been asked by the United States to stay out of the conflict in order to maximize Arab participation in coalition forces. Saddam sought to provoke Israel's entry to create a broader Arab-Israeli conflict that would reduce Arab support for the war effort against Iraq. Avi Shlaim, 'Israel and the Conflict', in *International Perspectives on the Gulf Conflict, 1990-91*, ed. Alex Danchev and Dan Keohane (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994), 59.

Although the action caused few casualties, it had a powerful psychological impact on Israeli society.⁴⁶⁶ The Iraqi attacks highlighted a new type of Israeli vulnerability. Saddam had used long-range missiles to attack Israeli territory, which Israelis feared could carry chemical weapons. The issuance of gas masks to all residents forced Israelis to realize the uncomfortable fact that warfare had moved beyond conventional military confrontation.

Israel's recognition of its increased vulnerability coincided with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the uncertainties associated with both the fate of Russia's nuclear stockpile and the world's nonproliferation regime.⁴⁶⁷ Israel's neighbors, including Syria, Algeria, Libya, and Iraq, reportedly had indicated an interest in purchasing nuclear material and employing displaced scientists from the former Soviet Union, and they had the financial resources to do so. The specter of a nuclear armed enemy now appeared to be a real threat. For example, a 1991 report on Algeria suggested that the country could be only a "very few years" away from building a nuclear bomb.⁴⁶⁸ A *Jerusalem Post* editorial entitled "The Real Middle East Problem" noted that Iraq, Libya, and Iran were all in a "scramble for nuclear capability."⁴⁶⁹

With Saddam's defeat in 1991 by the United States and its allies following his invasion of Kuwait, Iraq could no longer compete in this post-Soviet market. At least for

⁴⁶⁶ It produced fear that had tangible consequences. The government issued gas masks to all Israeli to carry with them at all times given the unpredictability of a chemical-carrying missile attack. The anxiety produced a significant increase in cardiac arrests and hundreds of emergency room visits for acute anxiety and panic attacks. E. Karsenty et al., 'Medical Aspects of the Iraqi Missile Attacks on Israel', *Israel Journal of Medical Sciences* 27, no. 11–12 (December 1991): 603–7.

⁴⁶⁷ See discussion *supra* at beginning of chapter. Rosenthal, 'SOVIET DISARRAY; U.S. Fears Spread of Soviet Nuclear Weapons'.

⁴⁶⁸ 'The Nuclear Vault: The Algerian Nuclear Problem', National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book (George Washington University, 10 September 2007), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb228/index.htm>.

⁴⁶⁹ The article also cited developments in other Arab weapons programs in Syria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Editorial Board, 'The Real Middle East Problem'.

the foreseeable future, Saddam would be preoccupied with maintaining control over his own country rather than planning invasions of others.⁴⁷⁰ Over the next ten years, Saddam would seek to make a comeback, and, eventually, his weapons development activities would again come under suspicion. For reasons that remain unclear, however, Saddam refused to dispel suspicions that he was attempting to rebuild his nuclear program or developing other weapons of mass destruction. His refusal to do so provided the United States with a justification for leading an invasion of Iraq in 2003, which resulted in Saddam's downfall.⁴⁷¹

Although Saddam remained in power after the first Gulf War, Israel nevertheless recognized that the threat he posed to their country had significantly diminished. This necessitated reprioritizing the remaining threats it faced. Such decisions involved more than debating classified military assessments and contingency plans. Given Israel's political culture, it would need to include making a case to the public and rallying popular support for new policies targeting identifiable enemies. One obvious candidate for filling the threat vacuum left by Iraq was Iran.

In the beginning, the Israeli media promoted the increase in Iran awareness, although it is unclear whether this was done on its own initiative or due to prodding from government officials. Stories not only frequently mentioned Iran as a potential black-market customer for Soviet nuclear material, but also ascribed motives to Iran's

⁴⁷⁰ Saddam also increasingly focused on internal security and his personal protection. During the First Gulf War, President George H. W. Bush had implied that the U.S. would assist Iraqi Shiites to overthrow Saddam. When the war ended without regime change, the Iraqi military violently suppressed the revolt. Kevin M. Woods et al., *The Iraqi Perspectives Report: Saddam's Senior Leadership on Operation Iraqi Freedom From the Official U.S. Joint Forces Command Report* (Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 31–32, 51–52.

⁴⁷¹ This was not the only false premise of the 2003 U.S. invasion. The Bush administration maintained that Iraq had supported the September 11 terrorist attacks, which was categorically untrue.

quest. While reports of Arab buyers generally focused on factual accounts, discussion of Iran included analyses of how the country's acquisition of nuclear "know-how" would change the region's balance of power and complicate the security picture. Narratives began increasingly calling into question the motives and intentions behind Iranian nuclear development efforts. The stories echoed earlier descriptions of Saddam. They spoke of Iran's leaders as irrational and lacking in self-restraint. Adding the new dimension of religious fanaticism, they implied that Iran's leaders would not be inhibited from using a nuclear weapon as a means of achieving their goals of destroying the Jewish State.⁴⁷²

In early 1992, the *Jerusalem Post* ran a series of stories focusing on Iran. This was noteworthy because the messages were evidently targeting Israeli elites, the immigrant communities, and an international audience. The content of the stories and their placement on page one emphasized to readers the need to address the threat posed by Iran's nuclear ambitions. Significantly, the stories offered few new factual details. The "news" element was the previously reported fact that Iran was in the market for Soviet leftovers.⁴⁷³ The first story spoke of how the Iranians were buying Soviet weaponry at a "breakneck pace." It then added a variety of speculative items, including the location of ex-Soviet scientists and the intention of Iran's leaders to fill the void left by Iraq following its defeat in the First Gulf War with an Islamic hegemony dominated by the Iranians.⁴⁷⁴ A subsequent story reported that Iran was on a "single-minded campaign to become a regional power," before adding new accusations that the country was pouring money into ex-Soviet Muslim republics, including Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan,

⁴⁷² Alon Pinkas, 'Thinking the Unthinkable About Iran', *Jerusalem Post*, 23 April 1992.

⁴⁷³ The page one headline of the first story claimed that "Cheap Soviet Arms Make Iranians a Major Threat." Alon Pinkas, 'Cheap Soviet Arms Make Iranians a Major Threat', *Jerusalem Post*, 9 January 1992.

⁴⁷⁴ Pinkas.

and that Iran had “made no secret of its intention to become a nuclear power.” It concluded by warning, “It is a mistake to assume that post-Khomeini Iran is more moderate. The present leadership in Teheran is simply more sophisticated.”⁴⁷⁵

Ironically, if read carefully, the stories highlighted how changes outside of Iran, namely those in Iraq and the Soviet Union, were affecting Iran and, by extension, Israel. The news was not that either country had changed: Iran was known to have a nuclear development program, and Israel still had lots of enemies. Rather, it was that the disintegration of the Soviet Union reportedly provided Iran with new opportunities for influence and weapons acquisition, while the defeat of Saddam reduced Iraq’s threat to Israel. What these developments actually portended, however, was speculative; but there was no shortage of speculation from many quarters.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin shared Israel’s concern about Iran’s nuclear program with U.S. President Bill Clinton during a 1992 meeting. Shortly afterwards, the United States House of Representatives Republican Research Committee claimed that Iran had already acquired “all or virtually all of the components required for the construction of two to three nuclear weapons.” In its report, the committee concluded that it believed “with 98% certainty” that Iran already had all (or virtually all) of the components necessary for two to three operational nuclear weapons.⁴⁷⁶ In what would become a predictive ritual over the next 25 years, the committee claimed that “it was likely that these [Soviet-supplied nuclear] weapons would be operational by February to April 1992.”⁴⁷⁷ Similarly, a *U.S. News and World Report* story reported that three nuclear

⁴⁷⁵ Yedidya Atlas, ‘Iranian Threat Never Went Away’, *Jerusalem Post*, 16 February 1992.

⁴⁷⁶ Hedges, ‘Iran May Be Able to Build an Atomic Bomb in 5 Years, U.S. and Israeli Officials Fear’.

⁴⁷⁷ Pinkas, ‘Thinking the Unthinkable About Iran’.

warheads, which had gone missing from Kazakhstan, had been sold to Iran.⁴⁷⁸ These claims could not be verified.⁴⁷⁹

It did not matter to Israel whether claims highlighting Iran's dangerousness were verifiable so long as they were difficult to refute. Israel was seeking to construct a compelling threat narrative featuring Iran's leaders as determined to harm Israel. Only Iranians could dispute the intentions attributed to them, and they could not be trusted to tell the truth.

D. Exposing Iran's "Secret" Program

On August 14, 2002, a spokesperson for the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI),⁴⁸⁰ an anti-Iranian government opposition group based in France, held a press conference in Washington, DC to announce it had discovered two undeclared nuclear sites inside Iran. According to the NCRI, Iran was secretly constructing these facilities unbeknownst to the IAEA and international inspectors. Their spokesman, Alireza Jafarzadeh, claimed that the revelations resulted from "extensive research and investigation" conducted by the NCRI. Few familiar with the organization, however,

⁴⁷⁸ The sources of the claims reportedly were the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and other intelligence sources. Inspectors from the IAEA were never able to verify them during inspection trips to Iran. Hedges, 'Iran May Be Able to Build an Atomic Bomb in 5 Years, U.S. and Israeli Officials Fear'.

⁴⁷⁹ The Kazakhstan missile purchase was dismissed by Uri Saguy, head of Israeli military intelligence, as having "no factual basis." Yossi Melman, 'IRAN'S LETHAL SECRET', *Washington Post*, 18 October 1992, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1992/10/18/irans-lethal-secret/2994e63c-b341-41ae-b87b-0141a68f9a27/>.

⁴⁸⁰ Originally designed as a loose coalition of exiled Iranian dissident groups, two leaders of the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) organization founded the NCRI in Paris in 1981. The NCRI served as the public-facing political wing controlled by the MEK. Like the MEK, the U.S. Treasury Department designated the NCRI as a terrorist organization, calling it an "alias of the MEK." United States Treasury Department Office of Public Affairs, 'Designation of National Council of Resistance in Iran, National Council of Resistance and Peoples Mujahedin of Iran under Executive Order 13224', 15 August 2003, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/js664.aspx>.

believed that it had the resources to develop this intelligence; they suspected that the NCRI was itself failing to disclose its source of secret help.

The announcement, which was impressively specific about Iran and its nuclear activities, appeared designed to raise suspicion along with public awareness about Iran's intentions. The heretofore secret sites at Natanz and Arak appeared to have been chosen for their strategic defensive position. The Natanz facility was located deep underground inside a bunker ringed by a thick concrete wall, while the heavy water reactor at Arak could arguably be used to produce material for building nuclear weapons. The NCRI message was clear: the clandestine construction of nuclear facilities fortified to withstand attack coupled with Iran's lack of candor about its nuclear activities proved that Iran was hiding something: Iran was building a bomb.

Although the NCRI intended its report to generate intense concern, the revelations were not particularly surprising to United States intelligence, nor was the evidence conclusive. Throughout the 1980s, the CIA had not found evidence of a military component in Iran's nuclear pursuits. It changed this assessment shortly before the NCRI announcement. By the time of the press conference, it had already compiled the information and submitted it to the IAEA.⁴⁸¹ Many suspected that it was the U.S. evidence leaked by the Israelis which provided the basis for the NCRI's polished presentation of the revelations. These suspicions explained the otherwise surprising and uncharacteristically muted reaction in Israel. The revelations did not trigger a major

⁴⁸¹ Jeffrey Lewis, 'NCRI Did Not Discover Natanz', *Arms Control Wonk* (blog), 28 October 2006, <https://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/201274/ncri-did-not-discover-natanz/>.

outcry by either public officials, intellectuals, or the media.⁴⁸² No Israeli leader used the occasion to offer a new threat narrative.⁴⁸³

Either unknown or unacknowledged as part of the discourse surrounding the NCRI revelations was the fact that Iran was nearing the decision to end its consideration of weapons development. In 2003, months after the public revelation of the new Natanz and Arak facilities, Iran ended all activities associated with military applications of its nuclear program.⁴⁸⁴ It maintained, however, that it would continue its development of nuclear energy, including its efforts to master the nuclear fuel cycle and advance its uranium enrichment capabilities.

Iran undoubtedly knew that this decision would not end the debate renewed by the 2002 revelations. That it could unequivocally assert its compliance with the NPT and direct its limited resources to economic and human development programs would not undermine its status as a potential nuclear power. It was still enriching fuel and its scientists had acquired knowledge that could be utilized should the country's leaders again change their minds.

⁴⁸² The *Jerusalem Post* made no mention of the NCRI disclosure in either its reporting or editorials.

⁴⁸³ Prime Minister Ariel Sharon offered no official statement following the NCRI press conference. In a November 2012 interview he claimed that Iran was the “center of world terror” and that it merited U.S. attention after the war in Iraq was completed. Jack Caravelli, *Nuclear Insecurity: Understanding the Threat from Rogue Nations and Terrorists* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008), 108.

⁴⁸⁴ In its December 2015 report, the IAEA noted that the “activities to be undertaken in support of a possible military dimension to [Iran’s] nuclear program” began in the late 1980s and continued into the early 2000s. These activities were “brought to a halt in late 2003 and the work was fully recorded, equipment and work places were either cleaned or disposed of.” This was the same information that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu dramatically “disclosed” in a highly-publicized speech on April 30, 2018. Board of Directors, ‘Final Assessment on Past and Present Outstanding Issues Regarding Iran’s Nuclear Programme’ (International Atomic Energy Agency, December 2015); Benjamin Netanyahu, ‘PM Netanyahu Reveals the Iranian Secret Nuclear Program’, (30 April 2018), http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Events/Pages/event_iran300418.aspx.

By creating ambiguity and fostering uncertainty, Iran was allowing its enemies to seek what they wanted to conclude regarding Iran's nuclear capacity, its leaders' intentions for its program, and the risk it posed. In sum, it provided a foundation upon which an enemy could construct a narrative featuring Iran as an existential threat.

III. Phase I: Going to War with the Axis of Evil

A. Invading Iraq

The United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003, although not obvious at the time, was a transformative moment for Israel's relationship with Iran. The administration of American president George W. Bush had pivoted from its military invasion of Afghanistan, the country supposedly harboring the terrorists responsible for the September 11 attacks, to invade Iraq, seeking regime change. Facts subsequently contradicted several of the president's explanations for his attack on Iraq, including that its leader, Saddam Hussein, had aided the attacks on 9/11.⁴⁸⁵ Other justifications included that Saddam had a weapons of mass destruction program that threatened the security of the United States, or that his ouster promised a democratic transformation of the Middle East. Whatever the "real" reason, Israel fully supported the U.S. decision because it represented the operationalizing of a regime change policy in the Middle East. In making the case for war, Bush had characterized Iraq as part of an "Axis of Evil," comprised of dangerous enemies of the United States due to their development of nuclear weapons and sponsorship of terrorism.

⁴⁸⁵ Neither the 9/11 Commission Report nor the Senate Intelligence Committee's investigation found evidence of Saddam's responsibility for the attacks. *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 11; Senate Committee on Intelligence, 'Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq' (Washington, DC: United States Senate, 7 July 2004).

Israel had lobbied hard in favor of war against Saddam. Many Israelis hoped that a quick military victory against the Iraqis would pave the way for future military action against neighboring Iran, also part of the Axis of Evil. At the very least, the American invasion warned Iran to reconsider its ambition of advancing its nuclear program. Netanyahu, then a private citizen, echoed the idealistic reasoning that the toppling of Saddam could initiate a process of creating a more democratic, stable, and safe Middle East.⁴⁸⁶ Ephraim Inbar, head of the Bar-Ilan BESA Center, advanced the economic case for invasion, arguing that Israel would save “billions of shekels” in defense costs.⁴⁸⁷

For most Israelis, as well as for President Bush, the ultimate fate of Iraq was less important than removing Saddam and dismantling his presumptive weapons program. Neither the Americans nor the Israelis gave much thought to the feasibility of Iraq becoming a Western-style democracy, or whether future leaders of that country would be any more sympathetic to Israel than its current one. The Israelis assumed the message would be clear: the same fate could await any Middle East leader seeking to produce weapons of mass destruction.

The ease with which the United States initially dispatched the Iraqi conventional forces and toppled Saddam’s government added to Israeli optimism. Debate about the logic of military action against Iran gave way to discussion of timing. After all, if Iraq’s weapons program threatened global peace and stability, so too did Iran’s alleged development of nuclear weapons.⁴⁸⁸ The renewed discussion included speculation

⁴⁸⁶ A *Haaretz* journalist subsequently noted the similarities between Netanyahu’s case for war with Iraq in 2002 and his calls for military action against Iran a decade later. Barak Ravid, ‘Iraq 2002, Iran 2012: Compare and Contrast Netanyahu’s Speeches’, *Haaretz*, 4 October 2012, <https://www.haaretz.com/blogs/diplomania/iraq-2002-iran-2012-compare-and-contrast-netanyahu-s-speeches-1.468213>.

⁴⁸⁷ Herb Keinon, ‘Saddam’s Fall Alters Israel’s Strategic Situation - Experts’, *Jerusalem Post*, 11 April 2003.

⁴⁸⁸ Israeli officials reiterated earlier claims that Iran, if given the chance, would not hesitate to use a nuclear device against Israel and might even consider using it to

about the ease with which regime change in Iran could be effected.⁴⁸⁹ In a column entitled, “It’s Mullah Time!” Mark Steyn claimed that this would be easy since 90% of Iranians desired change.⁴⁹⁰

Needless to say, subsequent events in Iraq dampened Israeli optimism for achieving successful regime change in Iran. For advocates of such action, however, the genie was out of the bottle: they had committed to a strategy involving the use of force. Having dismissed less dramatic options, they had no other plan. Given that the United States had created chaos in Iraq, however, military and political leaders privately debated the capability of carrying out the strategy they were publicly advocating.

B. Israel’s Case for Iran

The remarkable feature of the Iran nuclear threat narrative initiated by Ephraim Sneh and amplified by Netanyahu is that it was grounded in speculation. During the 1990s, no one knew with certainty the nature of Iran’s nuclear program or its strategic intentions. As mentioned earlier, few had much knowledge about Iran at all.⁴⁹¹ As the United States got bogged down in the Iraq quagmire, it became harder to make the case for war with Iran. That is not to say that some did not try. Developments in Iran

support Hezbollah forces in a war against Israel. Matthew Gutman, ‘US Confirms Israeli Suspicions about Iranian Nuclear Program’, *Jerusalem Post*, 12 June 2003.

⁴⁸⁹ This sense that Israelis knew what the Iranian people wanted for themselves and their future was a common theme of Israeli media coverage during this period. Many commentators predicted that the lack of popular support for the Iranian regime would make its overthrow a relatively simple task. Steyn estimated that 90% of Iranians desired regime change, while Rosenblum cited a “secret poll by the mullahs” that allegedly found that only four percent of the populace believe the government is legitimate. In June 2003, the *Jerusalem Post* editorialized that Israel should declare itself the “advocate for the [Iranian] people – what they truly want is to be rid of the regime.” Mark Steyn, ‘It’s Mullah Time!’, *Jerusalem Post*, 24 June 2003; Editorial Board, ‘Iran’s People Power’, *Jerusalem Post*, 17 June 2003; Jonathan Rosenblum, ‘A Silver Lining for Dark Clouds’, *Jerusalem Post*, 13 December 2002.

⁴⁹⁰ Steyn, ‘It’s Mullah Time!’

⁴⁹¹ See *supra*, Chapter 2, Part IV, Section C.

contributed to a robust debate in Israel that focused on four main issues: what was happening at Iran's nuclear facilities;⁴⁹² how long will it take Iran to build and test a nuclear weapon; what are Iran's intentions vis-à-vis Israel; and why is Israel cutting its defense budget at this time?

Many Israelis had believed that toppling Saddam would enable Israel to reduce its defense expenditures. Facing budget problems, Israel decided to cut its defense spending after the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Ironically, Israel's finance minister at the time, Benjamin Netanyahu, advanced that recommendation.⁴⁹³ Not surprisingly, Iran hawks sharply condemned the decision. Ephraim Sneh, now a Labor Knesset Member (MK) led the opposition accusing Ariel Sharon's government of complacency in the face of what he claimed was the real – and growing – threat to Israel's security.⁴⁹⁴

The alarmists received new ammunition in August 2003 when the IAEA reported finding trace amounts of highly enriched uranium at the Natanz nuclear facility. The revelation drew very different responses from Israeli and Iranian leaders. The latter dismissed the significance of the finding, claiming that the traces were left on used components that had been obtained from overseas.⁴⁹⁵ For many Israelis, this was the first hard evidence that proved Iran was secretly producing a bomb. The hawks dismissed or ignored Iran's negotiation offer, which they considered untrustworthy,⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹² See *supra*, Chapter 4, Part II, Section D.

⁴⁹³ Gideon Alon, 'Concerned About Syria and Iran', *Haaretz*, 4 August 2003, <http://www.haaretz.com/concerned-about-syria-and-iran-1.96152>.

⁴⁹⁴ Alon.

⁴⁹⁵ A month later, Iran agreed to enter negotiations over suspending its nuclear enrichment and processing. It also considered opening its nuclear sites to unannounced inspections and signing the Additional Protocol of the NPT. 'Timeline of Iran's Controversial Nuclear Program', CNN.com, 19 March 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/03/06/world/meast/iran-timeline/index.html>.

⁴⁹⁶ Iran's nuclear program had become a battleground between the elected reformist and the conservative hardline factions. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei fought back against Khatami's popularity by marginalizing him and working to block his reformist initiatives. Thus, while Khatami sought a nuclear accord with the West, Khamenei and

and they renewed calls for Israeli action sooner rather than later. When, three months later, the IAEA issued another report claiming that there was no evidence of a secret nuclear weapons program in Iran,⁴⁹⁷ it made no apparent difference in their position.⁴⁹⁸

Meanwhile, “knowledgeable” Israelis offered a variety of timetables for Iran’s successful completion of a bomb. Notable among them were military leaders, who in the past had been hesitant to assign concrete dates to Iran’s nuclear progress. Israeli military intelligence chief Major General Aharon Ze’evi, despite having refused to discuss the possibility of Israeli military action against Iran, said that he estimated that Iran was just two years away from building its bomb.⁴⁹⁹ The day after the November IAEA report came out, Israel’s Defense Minister, Shaul Mofaz, reduced this estimate of production to less than a year.⁵⁰⁰ Although officials offered their predictions without much evidence to support their accuracy, the predictions had an important effect on Israeli perceptions of the imminence of the Iranian threat.

Precision was less important than the idea that the time for completion was getting closer. The timetables represented a deadline by which Israel would need to act

the IRGC made belligerent statements punctuated by the occasional missile test. The disagreement provided ammunition to both skeptics and optimists evaluating Iran’s future intentions. Israeli hawks cited Iran’s hardliners to challenge those willing to pursue diplomatic solutions.

⁴⁹⁷ ‘Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran’ (Vienna, Austria: International Atomic Energy Agency, 10 November 2003), <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov2003-75.pdf>.

⁴⁹⁸ The Israeli military could not ignore the growing sense of urgency and uncertainty among the politicians. A brigadier general speaking anonymously to the Israeli press, claimed, “It would not be an exaggeration to say that the [Israeli Air Force] has devoted the bulk of its procurement funds in the past decade to strike at Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile facilities.” By contrast, on the record comments were more measured. Ze’evi said that it would be inappropriate to discuss details in public, but notably did not deny that the military was considering preemptive attack. Arie O’Sullivan et al., ‘Ya’alon: Terror Not Sole Threat’, *Jerusalem Post*, 24 October 2003.

⁴⁹⁹ O’Sullivan et al.

⁵⁰⁰ Janine Zacharia, ‘Iran Will Have Nukes in a Year - Mofaz’, *Jerusalem Post*, 13 November 2003.

if it was to retard or destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities. Failure to act within the time frame would leave Israel facing annihilation. Raising alarms about timing ignored the fact that previous predicted deadlines had come and gone, and Iran had yet to produce a bomb or indicate that it planned to attack Israel. No officials had faced public questioning over their inaccurate predictions, and few had questioned the wisdom of continuing such speculation without evidentiary support. Instead, officials revised and reissued warnings of imminent or short-term bomb completion, each time seeking to emphasize the sense of urgency.⁵⁰¹

The warnings of the consequences for Israel if Iran realized its nuclear ambitions also continued as part of the political discourse. Speakers offered rhetorical pictures of the destruction that would be inflicted by the irrational acts of Iran's ideology-driven leaders. Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Chair, Yuval Steinitz, provided a characteristic example, claiming that Iran was a "totally irresponsible and unpredictable totalitarian regime that is ready to sacrifice millions of people for its crazy ideology."⁵⁰² Israeli officials directed this message to the global community as well. At the United Nations in 2004, Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom asserted, "Iran has replaced Saddam Hussein as the world's number one exporter of terror, hate, and instability," and

⁵⁰¹ By trying to clarify Iran's progress toward bomb production, Israeli officials likely muddied the analysis. Their constantly shifting assessments, often appearing in reaction to events, created more uncertainty about Iran's nuclear activities. This may have been the intended purpose since by frequently accelerating their estimates they engendered a sense of urgency among those who might otherwise be apathetic to the Iran threat. In an interview, one proliferation analyst expressed displeasure with longer timelines because they offered too much comfort to those who believed that Iran did not require urgent action. Interview with Emily Landau.

⁵⁰² Herb Keinon, 'Shalom Toughens Stance on Iran', *Jerusalem Post*, 24 September 2004.

reminded the assembled leaders that Iran's missiles could now reach London, Paris, Berlin, and Russia.⁵⁰³

Khatami's government officials generally refrained from engaging with Israel over its incendiary accusations. But conservative hardliners, including the Supreme Leader, who opposed Khatami's popularity and reform initiatives, often provided sufficient provocative comments to validate Israel's threat narrative.⁵⁰⁴ With few exceptions, however, Iran's leaders did not exhibit the same fear of Israel as Israelis exhibited toward Iran. As noted earlier, securitization efforts in this conflict were asymmetrical: Israeli officials maintained that Iran posed an existential threat, while Iran's elected government pursued improved relations with the West.

One of the exceptions to Iran's practice of not responding to Israeli accusations came in 2005 when Israel threatened military action against Iran's nuclear facilities.⁵⁰⁵ That year, an explosion at a government facility in Iran prompted speculation that Israel had carried out its threatened raid. Iranian officials insisted that the explosion had been a controlled demolition at an Iranian dam construction site, although doubts remained.⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰³ Silvan Shalom, 'United Nations General Assembly Presentation', (23 September 2004), <https://www.c-span.org/video/?183637-2/united-nations-general-assembly-meeting>.

⁵⁰⁴ See footnote 461 *supra*

⁵⁰⁵ Associated Press, 'Iran Warns Israel against Attacking Nuke Facilities', *Jerusalem Post*, 12 May 2004.

⁵⁰⁶ In a Knesset debate on the Iran issue a week after the incident, Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom called Iran "the most dangerous country in the world" before offering yet another, accelerated timetable for Iran's completion of a nuclear bomb. He said that Iran might achieve nuclear weapons in the coming months. This contradicted the longer assessments of Defense Minister Mofaz and Major General Ze'evi from late 2003 and represented the shortest prediction by any government official. A month later, in another Knesset session, MKs from right-wing parties, including Nissan Slomiansky of NRP and Shmuel Halpert of Agudat Israel wondered aloud what could be done in response to this threat since Iran was a country that was not "normal" in the traditional sense. Slomiansky even questioned whether there would be any centralized command and control of future nuclear weapons systems in Iran, implying that the decision to

Yet for all the discussion of Iran – including the potential for military action – within the Israeli government, military, and media, in early 2005 it remained unclear whether the Israeli public was significantly fearful – or even aware – of their leaders’ concerns over Iran.⁵⁰⁷ Polls gauging public opinion on national security did not ask respondents their opinions of Iran’s nuclear program, whether they believed that Iran posed a threat (existential or otherwise), or whether they favored using military force to halt Iran’s nuclear progress. Polls continued to reflect the public’s concern with the traditional security threats, including Palestinian unrest and the activities of neighboring Arab states.⁵⁰⁸

Israeli public ambivalence would soon change, however, when a controversial new Iranian leader emerged and brought Iran to the forefront of Israeli political consciousness.

IV. Phase II: Confronting the Villain

A. The Rise of Ahmadinejad

Ahmadinejad’s surprise victory in the Iranian presidential election in 2005 was a gift to Israeli hawks. His predecessor, Mohammad Khatami, had engaged in negotiations that, at a minimum, belied the charges that the country was singularly focused on

launch a nuclear strike could be left to a motivated ideologue. The “easiest” solution to this problem, he said, was regime change. ‘236th Meeting of the 16th Knesset’, 21 March 2005, Knesset Transcripts.

⁵⁰⁷ There are several reasons why the Israeli public may not have shared the fears voiced by the political establishment. Evidence of Iran’s weapons program was highly technical, and speculation about Iran’s intentions was largely hypothetical. If Iran was directing terrorism against Israel, it was doing so through proxies without conclusive evidence of a direct linkage to the Iranian regime. Even if Israelis were not aware of the power struggle in Iran, they were hearing conflicting reports about Iran’s intentions.

⁵⁰⁸ The most consistent resource for national security polling in Israel is the Peace Index produced by the Israel Democracy Institute. The survey began regularly tracking public opinion on “the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel, and current events of a political or diplomatic nature” in 1994. It asked its first question on Iran in 2006.

building a bomb to destroy Israel. The situation in Iran, however, was far from clear. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei grew suspicious of the popular Khatami during the latter's second term in office and precipitated a conflict between the reformists and the conservatives, with the nuclear program as its battleground. Thus, while Khatami's government explored possible diplomatic solutions with the West, Khamenei and the IRGC issued belligerent public statements punctuated by an occasional missile test to disrupt discussions. Although the Second Intifada and its attendant security problems commanded Israel's immediate attention, the remarks of the Iranian hardliners were sufficient to support Israeli hawks' warnings of the dangers of Iran and keep the issue in the news.⁵⁰⁹

By 2005, as Iran prepared for a presidential leadership change, Israel could not be optimistic about prospects for international action against Iran. It was clear that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein was not going to transform the Middle East into the envisioned democratic utopia. If anything, the United States' war in Iraq appeared to be worsening.⁵¹⁰ In June elections in neighboring Lebanon, Hezbollah, an insurgent organization that was one of Israel's sworn enemies, won fourteen seats in the national parliament, as well as all 23 seats in southern Lebanon.⁵¹¹ The July 7, 2005 terrorist attacks in London and the November 2005 hotel bombings in Jordan highlighted the spread of terrorism and the vulnerability of civilians anywhere in the world. The

⁵⁰⁹ The Second Intifada began in 2000 following a controversial visit by Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount/Al Aqsa Mosque facility in Jerusalem. It lasted roughly through early 2005, but there is no agreed upon date for its end.

⁵¹⁰ "'Quagmire' Analogy Gets Much Use | Fox News", Fox News, 28 June 2005, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/2005/06/28/quagmire-analogy-gets-much-use.html>.

⁵¹¹ In alliance with Amal, another Shiite resistance organization turned political party, Hezbollah secured 35 seats in the Lebanese parliament. With their election results, the Hezbollah/Amal alliance became the largest Shiite party in Lebanon. Esther Pan, 'LEBANON: Election Results', *Council on Foreign Relations* (blog), 21 June 2005, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/lebanon-election-results>.

optimism that Western determination could reshape the Middle East was, if not gone, at least fading quickly.

In the midst of this turmoil, Iranians elected a new leader. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory in a run-off election on June 24, 2005, represented a significant change of leadership. His mix of hardline conservative politics, bombastic style, and virulent anti-Semitism made him the perfect villain for Israelis who sought to portray Iran in monolithic terms. That he came to power through ostensibly democratic elections reinforced many of the stereotypical characteristics that Israelis leaders had attributed to Iran.⁵¹²

Ahmadinejad surprised observers by making the run-off.⁵¹³ At the time, he was a relative newcomer to electoral politics in Iran, having served only two years as Mayor of Tehran.⁵¹⁴ His subsequent defeat of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a two-term former president and one of the most powerful politicians in Iran, came as a bigger surprise.⁵¹⁵ As Mayor, Ahmadinejad had rolled back many of the liberalizing measures of his more moderate mayoral predecessors and, in his presidential campaign, sharply criticized the

⁵¹² Iranian elections are, at best, partially democratic. While candidates are directly elected by popular vote, they are first vetted by the Guardian Council to ensure their commitment to the Islamic Republic and revolutionary ideals. The criteria for approval are vague and the non-public process is opaque. Presidential voting takes place in two rounds. All candidates compete in a first-round general election. If no candidate receives a majority of the votes cast, the two top vote-getters compete in a runoff election.

⁵¹³ Ahmadinejad narrowly made the runoff in a crowded first round field. In the first round, Ahmadinejad had placed a narrow second, winning 20% of the vote to Rafsanjani's 21%. Given Rafsanjani's prominence and power in Iranian politics relative to Ahmadinejad, most outside observers assumed that the former president would easily defeat the political newcomer in the second round. '2005 Presidential Election', Iran Data Portal - Syracuse University, accessed 16 July 2018, <http://irandataportal.syr.edu/2005-presidential-election>.

⁵¹⁴ The presidential victory was his first electoral victory, since the Tehran mayor is appointed by a committee.

⁵¹⁵ Rafsanjani played a pivotal role in installing Ali Khamenei as Supreme Leader in 1989 following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. Rafsanjani then assumed the presidency vacated by Khamenei and served two terms from 1989-1997. In the run-off, Ahmadinejad won with 61.7% of the vote. '2005 Presidential Election'.

reforms instituted by the Khatami government. Backed by conservative and hardline factions, Ahmadinejad promised a more confrontational approach to the West, and in particular, the United States.⁵¹⁶

Israel, or in Iranian political parlance the “Zionist Regime,” did not figure prominently in the campaign. With the focus primarily on the shortcomings of the Khatami presidency, the election did not garner much attention in Israel until Ahmadinejad’s unexpected victory. Initial reactions in Israel were quick to associate Ahmadinejad with Iran’s nuclear threat. In a cabinet meeting two days after the election, Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom claimed that Ahmadinejad’s victory proved that Iran was not actually interested in reform or conciliation, but rather valued only conservatism and extremism. He said Israel viewed with great concern Ahmadinejad’s promises to increase nuclear development, which, he argued, had “one purpose in mind: to obtain nuclear weapons.” He continued by saying it was now “more probable than ever” that Iran would arm terrorist organizations with nuclear weapons and bring the nuclear threat to the world’s doorstep. Shalom suggested that Israel seek to have the United Nations Security Council take up the issue of Iran’s nuclear program.⁵¹⁷

Those weighing in on the meaning of Ahmadinejad’s election offered two related messages, one primarily for domestic audiences and the other for the international community. First, Israelis who had propagated the Iran threat narrative claimed that their domestic critics had been proven wrong. Second, Israeli leaders challenged the complacency of the Western nations. They criticized the West’s willingness to engage

⁵¹⁶ ‘Profile: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’, *BBC News*, 4 August 2010, sec. Middle East, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-10866448>.

⁵¹⁷ ‘Cabinet Meeting Minutes’, 26 June 2005, Israeli Prime Minister’s Office.

with Iran, particularly because doing so accorded the Islamic Republic international legitimacy.⁵¹⁸

The Israeli hawks claimed that the election results vindicated their warnings. They claimed that the elections were “clearly rigged,” and that the Islamic Republic was finally beginning to abandon the pretense of electoral legitimacy.⁵¹⁹ In a stinging opinion piece entitled “The mask is off and no one cares,” columnist Caroline Glick wrote that the elections were a “democratic farce.” She called Ahmadinejad a “global terrorist who was actively seeking nuclear weapons.”⁵²⁰ One Israeli hardliner sarcastically noted the weakness of claiming democratic legitimacy, saying, “Even Hitler was democratically elected.”⁵²¹ Some who had been previously skeptical of Iranian intentions adopted revisionist claims about their previous views.⁵²² For those who had long been denouncing Iran, Ahmadinejad’s election did not represent a significant change. To the contrary, it was just the latest chapter in their Iran threat narrative. To the extent they

⁵¹⁸ Upon return from a trip to the United Nations in New York, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon stressed the need to prevent any agreement or compromise with Iran, especially over the issue of its nuclear program. He advocated transferring the handling of the issue from the International Atomic Energy Agency to the United Nations Security Council. ‘Cabinet Meeting Minutes’, 2 October 2005, Israeli Prime Minister’s Office.

⁵¹⁹ In addition to claiming the elections were rigged, Timmerman wrote in the *Jerusalem Post* that his interviews with defectors from the Islamic Republic over the past two years revealed that the “Islamic Republic has assembled 15 nuclear warheads.” Kenneth Timmerman, ‘The Coming Nuclear Showdown with Iran’, *Jerusalem Post*, 1 July 2005.

⁵²⁰ Caroline Glick, ‘The Mask Is off and No One Cares’, *Jerusalem Post*, 5 July 2005.

⁵²¹ Nissem Zeev of the Shas Party, from Knesset Transcripts ‘264th Meeting of the 16th Knesset’, 29 June 2005, Knesset Transcripts.

⁵²² In one example, at a conference on Iran, Amos Gilad claimed that the dire estimations of Israel’s military establishment in the late 1990s were “repeatedly dismissed by government officials.” Gilad appeared to be engaging in revisionist history, as the majority of 1990’s military assessments about Iran were less alarmist than those voiced by many government officials. It is possible that he was referring to the Netanyahu-led Likud government of 1996-1999, which initially indicated a willingness for engagement with Iran. Yaakov Katz, ‘Ex-MI Chief: Jihad Tsunami on the Way. Three Gaza Terrorists Wounded in IAF Missile Strike’, *Jerusalem Post*, 16 May 2006.

added new material in this installment, it was that they believed they could prove their former critics wrong.

Israeli leaders also used the election to castigate nations, especially in the West, for their willingness to treat the Islamic Republic as a legitimate state. They argued that Iran deserved confrontation not engagement. Through their criticism of Ahmadinejad as undeserving of respect as a head of state, they implied that Iran should be ostracized as a member of the international community. Undoubtedly, some Israelis hoped that the United States would find Ahmadinejad so objectionable as to warrant drastic action against Iran. No one, however, expressed optimism that this would happen.⁵²³

Ahmadinejad's election initially did not materially change the content of Israel's public narrative regarding Iran's nuclear threat. Thus, Ariel Sharon chose not to repeat this part of the narrative in his fall 2005 address to the United Nations General Assembly. In his speech, he included only a single reference to Iran as a threat to the world while refusing to mention the country by name.⁵²⁴ Believing that he could secure broad international opposition to Iran's nuclear activities and prevent compromise, he pursued his Iran agenda primarily out of the public's view.⁵²⁵ Upon his return from New York, Sharon reported to the cabinet that he had discussed the need for transferring the

⁵²³ Some openly admitted pessimism, predicting that Ahmadinejad would, like his predecessors, continue to enjoy international legitimacy, however undeserving.

⁵²⁴ Sharon noted the threats of both nuclear weapons acquisition and support for terrorism given Iran's "murky fundamentalism." Ariel Sharon, 'PM Sharon Addresses the United Nations General Assembly' (15 September 2005), <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/pm%20sharon%20addresses%20the%20un%20general%20assembly%2015-sep-2005.aspx>.

⁵²⁵ Notably, Israel eschewed diplomacy for engagement with Ahmadinejad's reformist predecessor, but now embraced it as a means for internationally isolating Iran. Ze'evi, Head of Israeli Military Intelligence, lauded these efforts, claiming that their success proved the utility of international diplomacy. Other Israeli officials, however, pushed for unilateral action against Iran. Herb Keinon, 'Key Israeli Officials Declare Support for More Unilateral Steps', *Jerusalem Post*, 29 September 2005.

Iranian nuclear issue from the IAEA to the United Nations Security Council, and that he had stressed the need to “prevent any agreement or compromise with Iran.”⁵²⁶

Soon thereafter, Ahmadinejad did not disappoint those who expected him to manifest the danger they claimed he represented. In an effort to provoke Israel – and by extension, the rest of the Western world – the Iranian government sponsored a conference in October 2005 entitled “A World Without Zionism.” Ahmadinejad used the occasion to refer to Israel as the “occupying regime” and to declare that it should be “wiped off the map.”⁵²⁷ Matching Sharon’s resistance to any compromise concerning Iran, Ahmadinejad stated, “We cannot compromise over the issue of Palestine.”

While it is difficult to say with certainty to what extent Ahmadinejad intended to create a global controversy with his remarks, once they were picked up by international media outlets, Israelis helped to disseminate them. Israeli officials found multiple reasons for citing the escalation in rhetoric. Former Israeli President Shimon Peres called for Iran to be expelled from the United Nations for committing a crime against humanity.⁵²⁸ Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom reminded the French Foreign Minister that Europe should remember that their cities are within range of Iranian missiles, and that it

⁵²⁶ ‘Cabinet Meeting Minutes’, 2 October 2005.

⁵²⁷ There is some controversy surrounding the exact translation of Ahmadinejad’s words. Most English translations of the Persian transcript posted on the Interior Ministry’s website use the phrase “wipe off the map” for the relevant section of the speech. Some, however, claim that Ahmadinejad’s actual words were closer to “must vanish from the arena of time,” and implied that Israel would instead collapse. The New York Times posted a full English translation on its website three days after the speech. It included the “wiped off the map” language. ‘Text of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s Speech’, *The New York Times*, 30 October 2005, sec. Week In Review, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/30/weekinreview/text-of-mahmoud-ahmadinejads-speech.html>; Glenn Kessler, ‘Did Ahmadinejad Really Say Israel Should Be “Wiped off the Map”?’, *Washington Post*, 5 October 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/did-ahmadinejad-really-say-israel-should-be-wiped-off-the-map/2011/10/04/gIQABJKML_blog.html.

⁵²⁸ Orly Halpern and Herb Keinon, ‘Iranian President: “Wipe Israel off Map”’, *Jerusalem Post*, 27 October 2005.

was important for the “whole Western world to stand united in its position” against the Iranian threat.⁵²⁹ He also reminded Israelis that Ahmadinejad’s threat was a reaffirmation of the long-held Iranian desire to destroy Israel.⁵³⁰

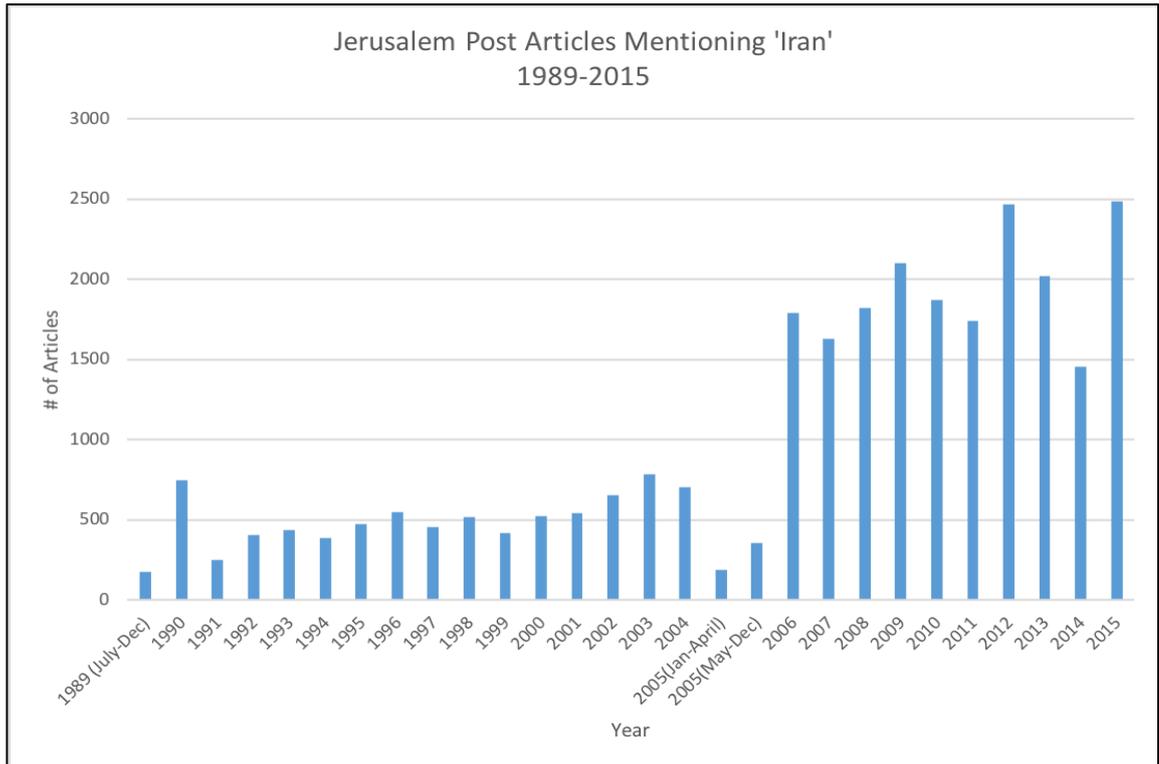
Ahmadinejad’s intemperate remarks and the anti-Semitic tone of the conference facilitated the amplification of the Iran threat narrative. Israeli media seized the opportunity to cast Ahmadinejad as Israel’s primary adversary. The average number of articles mentioning Iran more than tripled during the Ahmadinejad era, rising from 43.1 articles per month in the 180 months (fifteen years, ten months) before his election in May 2005 to 154.1 per month in the 128 months after (ten years, eight months). (See Figure 1, next page.) The percent change was even larger when limited only to the opinion section, where the number of pieces mentioning Iran increased by more than 500%, going from 10.4 per month in the period before his election to 53.1 after.⁵³¹ (See Figure 2, next page.)

⁵²⁹ In an open letter to world foreign ministers around the world, Shalom called on them to “act, both bilaterally and within the framework of the United Nations to bring such Iranian behaviour to an end.” Michel Zlotowski, ‘Shalom Urges Annan to Condemn Iran. Foreign Minister Enjoys a Well-Timed Visit to France’, *Jerusalem Post*, 28 October 2005; Silvan Shalom, ‘FM Shalom Appeals to Fellow Foreign Ministers on Iranian Threat’, 30 October 2005, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2005/Pages/FM%20Shalom%20appeals%20to%20fellow%20foreign%20ministers%20on%20Iranian%20threat%2030-Oct-2005.aspx>.

⁵³⁰ He referred to Rafsanjani’s 2001 Al Quds day speech that he had delivered as former president. Halpern and Keinon, ‘Iranian President’. See discussion *supra*. Chapter 3, Sec. V.

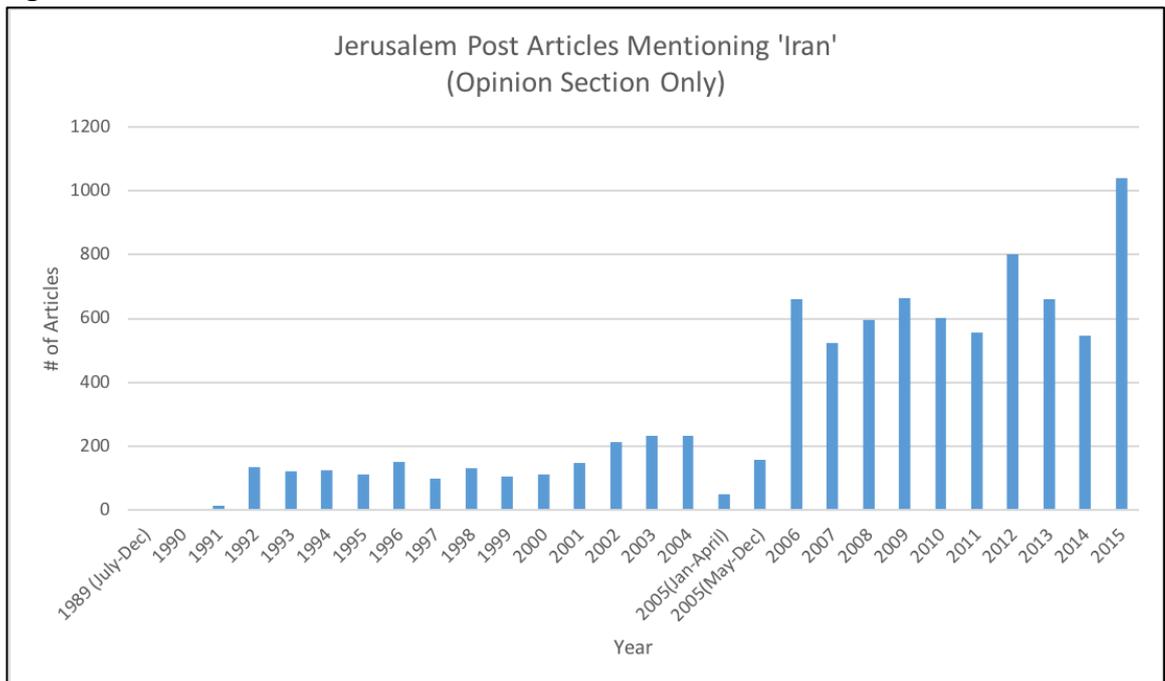
⁵³¹ Text analysis is a useful tool but comes with some limitations. This average was determined from a simple word search of the *Jerusalem Post* on the archive site Newsbank. As Jockers notes, raw numbers in corpus analysis can be misleading and require contextual examination to certify findings as meaningful. This was done using the Jockers-developed KWIC analysis, which enables the researcher to search large text databases to identify key words within their linguistic context. This was used as a general check to ensure that the majority of references were valid. Jockers, *Text Analysis with R for Students of Literature*.

Figure 1⁵³²



Source: Jerusalem Post Archives (via Newsbank)

Figure 2



Source: Jerusalem Post Archives (via Newsbank)

⁵³² Explanatory note on methodology: The corpus analysis employed in this thesis offer a visual representation of Iran messaging employed by a newspaper, as representative of the conservative-leaning media, and conservative Israeli political leader Benjamin Netanyahu (see Chapter 5, Part V, Section C.i.). It uses both Microsoft Excel and the R Programming software program to present graphically the messaging analyzed in this project.

Ahmadinejad's bombastic style made for easy comparisons to Hitler, Haman, or other would-be destroyers of the Jewish people. Those invoking history also claimed that the current threat of annihilation would be even greater if Iran could use nuclear weapons to achieve its genocidal goal.⁵³³ As Figure 3 shows, the frequency of distinct articles mentioning both "Iran" and "Holocaust" spiked following Ahmadinejad's ascendancy to Iranian national politics, as did various other combinations of "Iran" and Holocaust-related lexicon, including "Hitler," "Nazi," and "genocide."⁵³⁴ (See Figure 3, next page.) A significant proportion of these articles – nearly half, on average – mentioned Iran's nuclear program. Between 2005 and 2008, there were more than 200 articles per year using the words "Iran" and "Holocaust" in the same text. Many drew direct comparisons between modern-day Iran and the Final Solution in Nazi Germany. Prior to 2005, articles with both of these words had not exceeded 50 in any single year since 1989.

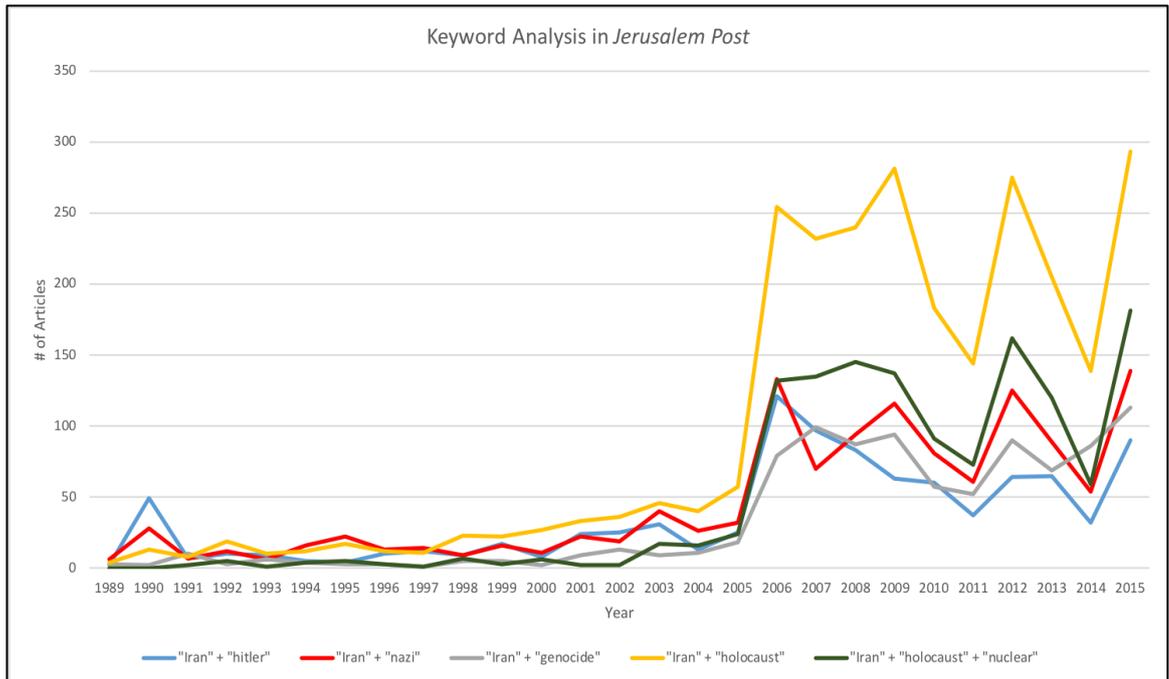
Security experts and ex-officials built upon this shift in public attention to advance the case for action. Avi Dichter,⁵³⁵ a former director of Israel's domestic intelligence agency, the Shin Bet, declared to a pro-Israel American audience that if Iran reaches an "irreversible point" in its nuclear program, America will have to do to Iran

⁵³³ A Knesset session following the conference revealed the anxiety it provoked. Many MKs took to the floor to decry Ahmadinejad's speech and compare him to past enemies of the Jewish people. '284th Meeting of the 16th Knesset', 2 November 2005, Knesset Transcripts.

⁵³⁴ It is worth noting that the first major spike in this language took place in 2006 rather than 2005, despite the fact that Ahmadinejad was first elected in the middle of 2005. This is likely because Ahmadinejad's infamous Holocaust denial press conference did not take place until December 2005. This event reinforced Ahmadinejad's international image as a Holocaust denier and anti-Semite in the eyes of many observers.

⁵³⁵ Dichter had recently left Israeli public service to become a research fellow at the Brookings Institution. He analyzed the situation in a speech to a U.S. pro-Israel organization.

Figure 3



Source: Jerusalem Post Archives (via Newsbank)

what Israel did at Osirak in Iraq.⁵³⁶ Lieutenant General Dan Halutz, Chief of Staff of the Israeli Armed Forces, declared that sanctions alone would not be sufficient to deter Iran. “In general,” he said, “for people who are used to eating olives and pita bread, sanctions which won’t let them have cream with their caviar is not something that is too bothersome.”⁵³⁷

Halutz’s comments were notable for two reasons. First, that a senior military officer was willing to speculate openly about the potential necessity of military action against Iran emphasized to the public the seriousness of the threat. Second, his evocation of cultural stereotypes about Iranians – their simplicity, poverty, and general orientalism – expressed an implicit feature of the Israeli political discourse on Iran. In this view, Iranians were either fanatics or simpletons who did not value life as much as Israelis. Iranians would readily make personal sacrifices in furtherance of aggressive military ambitions. Another Israeli general, Amos Yadlin, articulated a similar sentiment when he described the Iranian threat as “ideological in origin,” which created an “arc of evil that stretches between Teheran and Damascus.”⁵³⁸

It is difficult to know whether Israel’s leaders had orchestrated and coordinated the response to Ahmadinejad or whether individual leaders seized the opportunity to offer dire messages about Iran’s future. In either case, these messages created an argument for unilateral preemptive action by Israel if the international community failed to mount a collective response. Reflecting years later on the Ahmadinejad era, Israeli

⁵³⁶ Dichter reentered politics not long after this appearance, first in 2006 as Minister of Internal Security for Kadima, and then in 2009 as part of Netanyahu’s Likud government. Jerusalem Post correspondent, ‘Dichter: US May Have to Bomb Iran’, *Jerusalem Post*, 31 October 2005.

⁵³⁷ Arie O’Sullivan, ‘Halutz: Sanctions Won’t Deter Iran’, *Jerusalem Post*, 21 November 2005.

⁵³⁸ Gil Hoffman and Sheera Claire Frenkel, “‘I Prefer Fewer Declarations and More Deeds’”, *Jerusalem Post*, 10 November 2006.

journalist and political advisor Yaakov Katz observed that Ahmadinejad was a significant public relations victory for the Israelis because he embodied and articulated the threat characteristics that Israeli politicians had attributed to Iran.⁵³⁹ That he was an elected official – as opposed to an appointed religious cleric – added to his utility in Israeli portrayals of Iran, making the entire country seem willing to commit, and perhaps sacrifice, in the name of a divine mission.

Despite Ahmadinejad's provocations, the challenge for Israel remained to convince world leaders of the need for dramatic action. There was little appetite for expanding the current regional conflict beyond Iraq's borders, even among the most hawkish members of the Bush administration in the United States. Regime change in Iraq had gone so badly as to be a warning to anyone paying attention to beware of unintended consequences. Israeli leaders had no response, as they gave no indication that they had considered the repercussions of Iranian retaliatory action.⁵⁴⁰ Military officials, as noted above, expressed contempt for the idea that softer measures, such as economic sanctions, would work, while other prominent public figures doubled down on imagining the consequences of Israeli inaction. One such alarmist, Israeli television presenter Chanan Azran, published a book in March 2006 entitled *To Die of Fear: The "Dirty Bomb" – Nightmare Scenarios*.⁵⁴¹ In an interview with the *Jerusalem Post*, Azran explained that the comments of IDF Chief of Staff Halutz concerning how Iran might provide Al Qaeda with radioactive material for a dirty bomb was one of his main sources

⁵³⁹ Interview with Yaakov Katz.

⁵⁴⁰ It is likely that Israelis understood that Iran would not fail to respond to Israeli action, as had Iraq in 1980. Iranian leaders had consistently matched Israeli threats with their own promises of retaliation, and Iran's military was far more capable than Iraq's at the time of the Osirak strike.

⁵⁴¹ The *Jerusalem Post* described it as "a book filled with photographs of mushroom clouds, bio-chemical treatment exercises, the bubonic plague and unguarded Soviet-era military bases." Erik Schechter, 'Our Own 9/11?', *Jerusalem Post*, 3 March 2006.

of information about the seriousness of the threat. He called it “the first time a senior military person has called a spade a spade – or in this case, a dirty bomb.”⁵⁴² He added that it was only a matter of time before Israel was the victim of a non-conventional weapon attack on its soil.⁵⁴³ Chief of Israeli military intelligence Ze’evi Farkash also offered a particularly vivid image of the pending danger. He professed that “The Middle East is currently standing before a global jihad tsunami.”

The diffusion of the Iran narrative to and its impact on the Israeli public remained matters of speculation until April 2006. If a tenet of war theory is the requirement of public support – which in Israel is particularly essential due to the mandatory military service requirement – it is notable that the first public opinion poll regarding public attitudes toward Iran was so long in coming. Shortly after Israel’s national elections,⁵⁴⁴ the monthly Peace Index poll asked Israelis about their perceptions of the threat posed by Iran. The responses revealed that an impressive 78% of the Israeli public believed that Iran constituted a real strategic danger to Israel; only 16% disagreed. Significantly, however, the majority did not favor a unilateral military response by Israel against Iran’s nuclear facilities as the solution to this problem. Only 37% answered favorably while nearly half, 47%, opposed such action.⁵⁴⁵ That Israelis did

⁵⁴² Schechter.

⁵⁴³ Numbers of sales and readership of Azran’s book are unknown. It nonetheless received media attention. Schechter.

⁵⁴⁴ The newly formed Kadima Party, led by Ehud Olmert, won a plurality in March 2006 elections. It received 22% of the vote and secured 29 seats. Amir Peretz’s Labor party came in second with 15% of the vote and 19 seats, followed by the ultra-orthodox Shas party and Likud, now led by Netanyahu, each with 12 seats. Kadima joined with Labor, Shas, and Yisrael Beiteinu to form a government with Olmert as Prime Minister. Netanyahu, as the head of the largest party not in the government, became leader of the opposition. Although Iran was increasingly recognized as a security threat, issues related to Iran did not play a large role in the election that year. Shmuel Sandler, Manfred Gerstenfeld, and Jonathan Rynhold, *Israel at the Polls 2006*, Israeli History, Politics and Society (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁵⁴⁵ Ephraim Yaar and Tamar Hermann, ‘The Peace Index’, April 2006, <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonthEng.aspx?mark1=&mark2=&num=30>.

not support military intervention advocated by political and military leaders suggested that they did not share their assessment of the threat. As the poll did not drill down, we do not know the reasons for this lack of support. Still, for Israeli leaders, it was notable that at least one in three respondents favored a military response, which represented a solid base upon which to build a campaign for future offensive action.

B. Debating Strategy

The absence of public enthusiasm for extraordinary action against Iran did not deter those who believed it was the proper course of action. The internal debates between those wanting to pursue a diplomatic solution and those advocating stronger measures became public in May 2006 following Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's speech to the U.S. Congress. Although he invoked the familiar threat themes in condemning Iran's nuclear program and support for terrorism, many on the Israeli right attacked his strategy as insufficient. Caroline Glick of the *Jerusalem Post* called the speech "weak," and declared that Israel was well beyond the point where words alone will sway Iran.⁵⁴⁶ A column entitled "Religious Fanatic at a Persian Bazaar," exemplified the attacks. In it, Amir Taheri argued that the time for diplomacy with Iran was over. The real problem with Iran, he claimed, was that the Ahmadinejad government believed in its messianic vision backed by the hidden imam. With divine authority on its side, concessions in the international arena were unnecessary and illogical. Negotiating with such an individual, Taheri wrote, would be akin to appeasement with Adolf Hitler.⁵⁴⁷

Even as the United Nations Security Council imposed new sanctions against Iran, the Israeli right continued to argue that Iran could neither be engaged nor deterred. The embrace of Holocaust rhetoric signaled a shift in the argumentation from strategic

⁵⁴⁶ Caroline Glick, 'Hitler Is Still Dead', *Jerusalem Post*, 26 May 2006.

⁵⁴⁷ Amir Taheri, 'Religious Fanatic at a Persian Bazaar', *Jerusalem Post*, 28 May 2006.

assessment based upon facts to a case grounded in moral considerations. The proponents of action replaced rational security calculation with warnings of existential danger. In addition to hardline politicians, some of Israel's leading moral authorities weighed in with concerns for the continued survival of the Israeli – and by extension, Jewish – people. In May 2008, Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor and one of Israel's moral leaders, said in reference to Iran that it was mandatory for Israelis to “act against evil.” He added that it was the duty of “everyone who has a heart” to stand in opposition to Iran.⁵⁴⁸ Israel's right-wing religious leaders, having been initially reticent to reject diplomacy, joined in making the moral case.⁵⁴⁹ Notably, this chorus grew louder as Israel confronted what would be the second transformative event of this time period: its second war in Lebanon.

V. Phase III: Fighting Iran in Lebanon

A. The Second Lebanon War

In 2006 Israel invaded Lebanon, launching the Second Lebanon War, due to or in spite of its growing obsession with Iran. Tensions between Israel and Hezbollah had slowly simmered along Israel's northern border in the six years since Israel's abrupt withdrawal from south Lebanon. Israeli strategists were well aware of the role Iran had played in developing and supporting the Shiite militia forces, including Hezbollah, which had developed during Israel's 18-year occupation. Still, for those preoccupied with the Iran threat, there was a delay in connecting the violence that erupted in June 2006 with

⁵⁴⁸ Shlomo Cesana, ‘אני נאבק באחמדינג'אד’, *Israel Hayom*, 18 May 2008.

⁵⁴⁹ Not everyone attending agreed. David Menashri, an Iranian-born professor of Iran studies at Tel Aviv University, told a reporter, “The Israeli response to the Iranian nuclear issue plays into Iran's hands,” adding that Israel and its allies had more to gain from talking to Ahmadinejad than they did from threatening Iran. Orly Halpern, “‘Israel Should Stay Quiet about Iran’ MKs Causing More Harm than Good, Says TA Professor”, *Jerusalem Post*, 7 June 2006.

their threat narrative and action plan. The invasion followed abduction of two Israeli soldiers who had been patrolling along Israel's northern border. Israeli forces re-occupied southern Lebanon with the intent of rooting out the Hezbollah forces by eliminating their bases of operations.

By most accounts, the conflict proved complicated and confusing.⁵⁵⁰ Israeli troops were uncharacteristically disorganized and struggled to identify and engage an enemy whose members had integrated into the societal structure of south Lebanon.⁵⁵¹ The population was deeply hostile to the Israeli military, making it difficult for the IDF to gain any actionable intelligence on enemy operations. Israeli intelligence proved unprepared to counter Hezbollah's bunker-based defensive tactics and insurgency-style operations, and IDF ground troops struggled to coordinate their movements with air support.⁵⁵²

The fighting ended just over a month later with both sides declaring victory. Israeli leaders touted the damage they had inflicted on southern Lebanon – including a superior body count – as evidence that they had dealt a severe blow to Hezbollah. Meanwhile, Hezbollah claimed a strategic victory, noting that not only had they repelled the Israeli invaders, but they had survived the full force of the Israeli military's power, thereby disproving the invincibility of the IDF.

In retrospect, the Lebanon war changed the political landscape, not because of what happened or did not happen during the brief encounter, but because it produced a

⁵⁵⁰ Several soldiers present during the operation gave similar accounts to the author. While they asked not to be quoted, media and other reports echoed their assessment.

⁵⁵¹ Israel had to know Hezbollah's strategy since its leader Hassan Nasrallah had effectively announced it before the war. "[Hezbollah fighters] live in their houses, in their schools, in their churches, in their fields, in their farms, and in their factories." Marvin Kalb and Carol Saivetz, 'The Israeli-Hezbollah War of 2006: The Media as a Weapon in Asymmetrical Conflict' (Brookings Institution, 18 February 2007), 8.

⁵⁵² Blanford, *Warriors of God*.

new chapter of the Iran narrative. Ultimately, the agent for that narrative, Benjamin Netanyahu, would use it to secure his political agenda and restore himself to a position of power.

B. Toward a New War with Iran

Ultimately, the significance of the war would not be determined on the battlefield but revealed in the post-mortem that followed. This began with the military and strategic reviews of Israel's conduct. Both internal and third-party appraisals concluded that Israel had actually accomplished very little of what it had intended to achieve during the fighting. One scathing internal review called the war "a serious missed opportunity" in which several thousand men resisted the region's most powerful and technologically advanced military force. It cited Israeli political and military leaders for "grave failings."⁵⁵³ Many in the IDF agreed. They had sought to quickly dispatch Hezbollah forces, whom Israelis regarded as a second-rate terrorist organization capable of fighting only low-level guerrilla battles. Instead, like many militaries of history, they were unexpectedly defeated by an enemy whose quality they deemed far inferior to their own. Israeli forces returned home surprised by the competence of their foe, the quality of their weapons, and the sophistication of their tactical operations.⁵⁵⁴

While it took some time before public discussion of the conflict in Lebanon recognized an Iran connection, eventually opponents of the Olmert government raised the issue of linkage. Benjamin Netanyahu, then the leader of the Likud opposition, was among the first to condemn Iran's role in the conflict. He claimed that enemy forces had been "conceived, organized, trained and equipped by Iran, with Iran's goal of destroying

⁵⁵³ Steven Erlanger, 'Israeli Inquiry Finds "Grave Failings" in '06 War', *The New York Times*, 31 January 2008, sec. Middle East, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/31/world/middleeast/31mideast.html>.

⁵⁵⁴ Blanford, *Warriors of God*.

Israel and its fantasy ideology of building a once-glorious Muslim empire in which we are the first pit stop.” He went on to declare Iran, “The source of everything that is happening here now.” Invoking the Nazi analogy, he said, “These people [the Iranians] are stark-raving mad, but there is a method to their madness, just like Hitler.” According to Netanyahu, Iran could be found lurking behind nearly all of Israel’s enemies.⁵⁵⁵

Netanyahu’s accusations not only initiated discussion of Iranian involvement in, if not responsibility for, the war with Hezbollah, but it also transformed Iran from a passive threat into an active belligerent. It was now directly responsible for Israeli casualties. The *Jerusalem Post* captured the new development days after the end of fighting by entitling its editorial “A wake-up call.” The *Post* wrote,

“This struggle, in the end, has little to do with Lebanon, and even with Hezbollah, but with the true existential threats facing Israel, first and foremost from Iran...Our job now is to better prepare ourselves at every level: societal, diplomatic, governmental, and military; and, as the nation on the front line, do our utmost to mobilize the free world to collectively and effectively defend itself.”⁵⁵⁶

Interestingly, while Ahmadinejad and other Iranian officials celebrated Hezbollah’s victory over the Israelis, they disclaimed responsibility for helping them in the fighting. In Ahmadinejad’s narrative, the Israelis had been defeated by a “unified, patient, and stable people.” In an ironic turn-about, Iranian MP Hussein Najat called on UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to seek a war crimes indictment against Israel for its conduct during the fighting.⁵⁵⁷

The claim that Iran bore responsibility for Israel’s inability to root out Hezbollah in Lebanon gained traction as Israel struggled to explain the failure of its mission there. One explanation held that Israel had not understood its enemy in the conflict. Israel had

⁵⁵⁵ Gil Hoffman, ‘Netanyahu: Don’t Boycott the BBC’, *Jerusalem Post*, 11 August 2006.

⁵⁵⁶ Editorial Board, ‘A Wake-up Call’, *Jerusalem Post*, 13 August 2006.

⁵⁵⁷ ‘رئيس جمهوري: تجاوز رژیم صهیونیستی به لبنان تعدی به ملت های منطقه است’, *Jamejam Online*, 14 July 2006.

not just fought Hezbollah, it had engaged in a war against Iran. Defeat of the former could not come without engaging the latter. Eventually those seeking to rationalize Israel's performance during the war settled on a consensus that enabled them to pivot attention away from Lebanon in favor of an explanation that centered on Iran.

Accordingly, the enemy had not been a simple terrorist organization operating along Israel's northern border, but a country with a large, well-equipped army and aspirations of becoming a nuclear power. The threat narrative had a new chapter.

In the new account, this type of conflict could not be resolved by a month-long skirmish in a third country against a few thousand members of a terrorist organization acting as a proxy on behalf of the real enemy. Moreover, the fact that Israel had engaged in a hot war, which involved Iran, changed the nature of the threat calculus. It also allowed Israel to counter international criticism of its aggression by recasting itself as a victim. The rest of the world was insufficiently sympathetic to Israel's plight.⁵⁵⁸ The new narrative proved appealing. It penetrated popular literature, both fiction and non-fiction.

A novel authored by a former Israeli intelligence officer responsible for devising and gaming hypothetical nightmare scenarios for Israeli security is one such example. Originally published in 2003, *The Chosen One: The Mossad in Iran* by Shabtai Shoval gained attention in the immediate aftermath of the Lebanon War. He wrote of a coup d'état that forces Iran's religious leadership to abandon Tehran and take refuge in a secret bunker near the city of Qom.⁵⁵⁹ Faced with imminent defeat and certain death,

⁵⁵⁸ Israeli commentators bemoaned the bias against the Jewish State, particularly among international institutions like the UN. A common refrain was that anti-Israel bias prevented the world from seeing Iran's support of its proxy Hezbollah. See e.g. Robert Rozett, 'Recognizing Evil', *Jerusalem Post*, 22 August 2006.

⁵⁵⁹ Qom is the most religious city in Iran and an important center of Shiite religious scholarship and clerical training.

the Iranian clergy, led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei,⁵⁶⁰ decide to launch a nuclear attack against Israel, fulfilling their murderous destiny. A long-shot clandestine Mossad operation is the only hope for Israeli redemption.

The book is filled with Islamophobic and racist stereotypes portraying Iranians as bloodthirsty and untrustworthy. In one of the book's climactic moments, Khamenei gives a sermon to his "possessed" followers. As he announces the decision to launch the nuclear strike, he preaches, "The events at hand will open the eyes of those countrymen of ours who have resigned to the path of treason. I believe that once we unleash the fire bolts of Salah al-Dīn upon the Zionists, these traitors will cease their imbecilic war on God's messengers and return to the patronage of the Qur'an and the holy Ayatollahs."

The author graphically pictures the crowd's response:

The bunker's personnel chanted after him, their throats parched, as they stamped their feet in an ever-growing rhythm. A hypnotic power permeated the space, like a rolling thunder washing over the packed crowd in overwhelming and dense waves of resolve, crushing all resistance. Masses clamored for their foreseen death, driven by sheer faith.⁵⁶¹

After the Lebanese war, Shoval, who had become a prominent counterterrorism authority at an Israeli university, explained in an interview that he had written the book hoping that it would "bring the looming danger [of Iran] to the forefront of public consciousness."⁵⁶² Despite the book not making the best seller list, it contributed to the vilification of Iran as a security threat in a way that fired the imagination of those familiar with its story.

A year later, another book purporting to tell the real story behind the Lebanon war met with much greater commercial success. Ronen Bergman's *The Point of No*

⁵⁶⁰ Khamenei is the only real-life figure named in the book.

⁵⁶¹ Shabtai Shoval, *The Chosen One - The Mossad in Iran*, ed. Phil Weinstock, trans. Asaf Epstien, Second edition (Scientific Driven Systems LTD, 2003).

⁵⁶² Sam Ser, 'Tangling with Teheran', *Jerusalem Post*, 29 September 2006.

Return sold nearly 100,000 copies, which, by Israeli standards, was an impressive number.⁵⁶³ It was subsequently published in English under the more revealing title, *The Secret War with Iran: The 30-Year Clandestine Struggle Against the World's Most Dangerous Terrorist Power*. The book offers a grim portrait of Israeli military and intelligence efforts to counter and contain Iran. Going beyond its primary focus on the failures of the 2006 Lebanon campaign, Bergman delves into Israel's military past to construct a history of conflict with a heretofore unrecognized Iranian enemy.⁵⁶⁴ In the book's introduction, Bergman explains the challenge this poses:

The problem is that after three decades of trying to meet the Iranian challenge with a variety of strategies, covert negotiations, arms deals, critical dialogue, containment, direct political confrontation, and indirect action against its proxies, we still do not understand Iran. We do not know what its leaders want to do, and we do not know how to stop them from doing it, or at least, we do not know enough.⁵⁶⁵

Despite this absence of knowledge regarding Iranian intent, Bergman was sharply critical of Israeli complacency in facing the Iranian threat. According to Bergman, the conflict involved "a titanic struggle between an aggressive, ideology-driven Islamic revolutionary regime, assisted by a no less brutal ideological ally that is willing to do its bidding, and a complacent, satisfied society that thought it had put its existential fears behind it."⁵⁶⁶ For Bergman, Israel's ignorance of Iran was a critical shortcoming. Thus, it is significant that Bergman, an investigative journalist for the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Aharonot*, who is considered the reporter with the best connections to Israel's

⁵⁶³ Interview with Ronen Bergman, interview by Jonathan Leslie, Tel Aviv, Israel, 25 January 2016.

⁵⁶⁴ Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran*.

⁵⁶⁵ Bergman.

⁵⁶⁶ Bergman.

intelligence community,⁵⁶⁷ lamented in a subsequent interview that the Israeli establishment has failed to understand virtually every aspect of its conflict with Iran.⁵⁶⁸

In 2007 two additional publications made notable contributions to the public discourse. The publication of an influential essay noted that “For over two decades, since the era of former Prime Minister Menachem Begin, the Holocaust was rarely invoked, except on the extremes, in Israeli politics. In recent months, though, the Iranian threat has returned the Final Solution to the heart of Israeli discourse.”⁵⁶⁹ Authors Yossi Klein Halevi and Michael Oren, a future Israeli ambassador to the U.S, captured the growing fear represented by Ahmadinejad’s anti-Semitic rhetoric and Israel’s vulnerability to a nuclear Iran. At the same time, the article crystalized the transition of concern from Ahmadinejad’s view of history to a narrative in which the Holocaust served as a model for understanding Iranian behavior.⁵⁷⁰ The article, which received

⁵⁶⁷ Israelis consider Bergman to be the best-connected reporter to the Israeli intelligence community. As one seasoned political analyst put it in an off-the-record interview: “He is the Mossad’s leak guy.” His work can therefore read in part as public version of the Mossad’s state of knowledge about Iran and the Iranian threat. The lack of knowledge about Iran within the Israeli intelligence community also squares with the general description about Iran strategic planning given by Yossi Alpher in an interview with the author. Interview with Yossi Alpher, interview by Jonathan Leslie, Tel Aviv, Israel, 9 December 2015.

⁵⁶⁸ Interview with Ronen Bergman.

⁵⁶⁹ Yossi Klein Halevi and Michael B. Oren, ‘Israel’s Worst Nightmare’, *The New Republic*, 5 February 2007.

⁵⁷⁰ A year earlier a study conducted by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs highlighted the new linkage of Iran and Ahmadinejad to the threat of genocide. The published report, picturing a mushroom cloud on the cover, compared the 1990’s Rwandan genocide to modern Iran. The authors, who included prominent public intellectuals and moral leaders such as Dr. Dore Gold and Elie Wiesel, wrote, “The critical difference is that while the huts in Rwanda were equipped with the most basic of weapons, such as machetes, Iran, should the international community do nothing to prevent it, will soon acquire nuclear weapons. This would increase the risk of instant genocide, allowing no time or possibility for defensive efforts.” They authors recommended that, in addition to sanctions and international monitoring by the IAEA, Ahmadinejad should face charges for incitement to genocide before the International Criminal Court. Justus Reid Weiner et al., ‘Referral of Iranian President Ahmadinejad on the Charge of Incitement to Commit Genocide’ (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2006).

considerable attention, mentioned a poll in which “27 percent of Israelis said they would consider leaving if Iran went nuclear.”⁵⁷¹ It contributed to normalizing Holocaust discourse in the public debate⁵⁷² paving the way for Netanyahu’s morality-based messaging.⁵⁷³

Also in 2007, a new Israeli newspaper appeared, which took advantage of the information void on Iran and the growing emotional tenor of the public discourse. Known as *Yisrael Hayom* (or “Israel Today”), the publication quickly became one of the most widely-read newspapers in the country.⁵⁷⁴ Financed by a staunchly conservative American billionaire, Sheldon Adelson, who derived his fortune from the Las Vegas casino industry, the enterprise promoted right-wing policy proposals and championed the causes of conservative Israeli politicians, including Benjamin Netanyahu and Avigdor Lieberman.⁵⁷⁵ It was free to the public, a first for an Israel newspaper. Whether the

⁵⁷¹ They did not cite the source of the poll, but the figure has been repeated when speaking of Iran’s threat to Zionism.

⁵⁷² Not surprisingly, Ephraim Sneh adopted such rhetoric. In his penultimate month as a Knesset Minister, he told the *Jerusalem Post* that Iran “can’t be allowed to repeat Auschwitz.” Gil Hoffman, ‘Sneh: Iran Can’t Be Allowed to Repeat Auschwitz’, *Jerusalem Post*, 30 April 2008. That Sneh was not alone led Jonathan Tobin to pen an impassioned rebuttal to those criticizing the Holocaust rhetoric, writing: “Just as today many laugh at Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, they dismissed the murderous threats of Adolf Hitler as clownish bombast, and considered the brainwashing of a generation of German children by the Nazis unimportant. They denounced those who refused to be silent as prejudiced warmongers. Those truth-tellers were proved right, but too late to avert a world war, as well as a genocide.”

Jonathan S. Tobin, ‘Who’s Obsessed About Obsession’, *Jerusalem Post*, 22 October 2008.

⁵⁷³ See *infra* Chapter 5.

⁵⁷⁴ It achieved this through the use of extremely aggressive marketing tactics. The paper was offered en masse by an army of distributors across Israel each morning, given out at bus stops and various points of transit during busy commute times. Within three years, it would have the highest circulation of any paper in Israel. *Hayom’s* popularity was credited with diminishing readership of some of Israel’s other newspapers, leading to the bankruptcy and closing of several of them, including *Ma’ariv*. Noam Sheizaf, ‘Wither The Israeli Press?’, *The Daily Beast*, 3 October 2012, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/10/03/wither-the-israeli-press>.

⁵⁷⁵ Adelson’s goals in launching the paper were so blatant that they spawned an opposition movement in the Knesset in which members proposed a bill prohibiting the distribution of a free, full-sized newspaper. They feared that the paper would skew the

paper reflected a political shift in the Israeli public or influenced them in that direction is unclear and less important than its reporting and commentary on the security threats facing Israel. It accorded prominence to Iran in both its reporting and opinion pieces.

The sharp increase in the paper's readership share that followed its release allowed the paper to frame the debate of ideological issues and set its tone. In particular, security issues reflected the paper's right-wing, hawkish ideological bias. It evinced this bias on Iranian issues shortly after its debut by publishing critical and alarmist articles on Iran's nuclear program. In November, *Hayom* quoted Yossi Baidatz, the head of the Israeli military's research division in the intelligence branch, as claiming that international pressure had failed to stop Iran, and that in the worst-case scenario, Iran would have the capability to produce a bomb in under two years.⁵⁷⁶

The paper's focus on the Iran narrative followed the United Nations' imposition of a series of new sanctions against Iran earlier that year.⁵⁷⁷ Prime Minister Olmert hailed these measures as an "important, encouraging step by the international community."⁵⁷⁸ He added that Israel would "continue to act to the best of our ability...in order to strengthen this international front."⁵⁷⁹ While sanctions fit within Israel's Iran

media landscape in favor of Netanyahu and the Israeli right. The bill passed a first reading but later failed. Anshel Pfeffer, 'Everything You Need to Know About the Israel Hayom (Or Anti-Sheldon Adelson) Law', *Haaretz*, 12 November 2014, <https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-a-primer-on-the-israel-hayom-law-1.5327699>.

⁵⁷⁶ The statement was notable both because it was a public prediction by a serving military and because it appeared in a new newspaper impacting the Israeli media landscape. Gideon Allon, '2009 גרעינית יכולת עם יאיראן', *Israel Hayom*, 7 November 2007, <http://digital-edition.israelhayom.co.il/Olive/ODE/Israel/Default.aspx?href=ITD%2F2007%2F11%2F07>.

⁵⁷⁷ United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1747 imposed a ban on arms sales and expanded freezes on Iranian assets. Iran rejected the sanctions as illegitimate and restated its claim that its nuclear program was solely for peaceful purposes. 'Security Council Tightens Sanctions against Iran over Uranium Enrichment', UN News, 24 March 2007, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2007/03/213372-security-council-tightens-sanctions-against-iran-over-uranium-enrichment>.

⁵⁷⁸ 'Cabinet Meeting Minutes', 25 March 2007, Israeli Prime Minister's Office.

⁵⁷⁹ 'Cabinet Meeting Minutes'.

containment strategy, for the hawks they were merely necessary but not sufficient.

Thus, when evidence emerged that the sanctions may have had an impact, the hawks used their new ally *Hayom* to refute the conclusion.⁵⁸⁰

C. Challenges to the Narrative

In December 2007, the United States released its National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) for the past year, which reported that since 2003 Iran had suspended its military nuclear program and that, despite its ongoing nuclear development projects, it was no longer actively seeking to build a nuclear weapon.⁵⁸¹ The NIE, which is released annually both in classified and in unclassified versions, offers a rundown of all the national security threats facing the United States and the intelligence community's assessment of each.⁵⁸² For years, Israel had relied heavily on American intelligence reporting to bolster their claims about Iran's nuclear activities. Consequently, the revelation that belied its Iran threat narrative and the justification for its war in Lebanon had an outsize impact in Israel.

The following day, *Israel Hayom* carried several pieces about the NIE with a featured piece on the front page headlined, "In Tehran they died laughing at Jerusalem."⁵⁸³ The newspaper also juxtaposed pictures of the air defenses located around Iran's Natanz nuclear facility with pictures of the building itself implying

⁵⁸⁰ Allon, 'איראן עם יכולת גרעינית 2009'.

⁵⁸¹ The report stated, "We judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program." This halt had "lasted at least several years," according to the report. The report concluded that the decision to suspend the program "suggests [Iran] is less determined to develop nuclear weapons than we have been judging since 2005." 'Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities', National Intelligence Estimate (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, November 2007), https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Press%20Releases/2007%20Press%20Releases/20071203_release.pdf.

⁵⁸² An unclassified version is available to the public; a classified version is reserved for members of the intelligence and political communities.

⁵⁸³ Shlomo Cesana and Eitan Livne, 'בטהראן מתו מצחוק', *Israel Hayom*, 5 December 2007.

nefarious activity. Another headline highlighted the joy of the Iranian President at seeing the report, claiming that Ahmadinejad hailed the NIE as “the nation’s victory.”⁵⁸⁴ The paper ran an editorial written by Yaakov Amidror, a former Major General (who would become National Security Advisor to Benjamin Netanyahu), asking why Iran would even need to produce their own uranium if not for a bomb. “Why should the Iranians have to hide and risk the threat of sanctions, if they do not mean evil?” Amidror wrote.⁵⁸⁵ This, he claimed, was a reason to redouble Israel’s efforts to stop the activities Iran was hiding. *Hayom* argued that the NIE’s failure to find evidence of a weapons program was not proof of absence. It meant only that Iran had succeeded in hiding the evidence that the paper insisted was there.⁵⁸⁶ Through employing uncertainty in this unusual logic, the hawks effectively used the NIE’s conclusion that Iran had ended its weapons program to maintain that it proved the opposite. The press reports also indicated that some of Israel’s most prominent military figures and security advisors were prepared to distrust American intelligence and factual assessments in favor of relying upon their moral judgment of Iran’s dishonesty.

Others voiced similarly skeptical views about the report’s findings. Some cast doubts on the accuracy of the report’s conclusions. They pointed out that American intelligence agencies had been wrong in the past, most notably when they claimed the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.⁵⁸⁷ Amos Regev, *Israel Hayom*’s editor

⁵⁸⁴ Eitan Livne, ‘חמדינג’אד על הסוס נשיא איראן הגדיר את דו"ח המודיעין האמריקני כ"ניצחון', *Israel Hayom*, 6 December 2007.

⁵⁸⁵ Yaakov Amidror, ‘ובכל זאת, הכיוון האיראני ברור’, *Israel Hayom*, 5 December 2007.

⁵⁸⁶ There appeared a hint of doubt when Amidror wrote that if the U.S. is right about Iran’s abandonment of its nuclear military program, then Israel is the “Ze’ev Ze’ev,” or “The Boy Who Cried Wolf.” Amidror.

⁵⁸⁷ Few Israeli leaders mentioned that they had supported the Iraq invasion relying upon intelligence reports of WMD despite reasons to question its accuracy. They overlooked the irony of equating a false claim of a weapons program in one country with a finding that no program existed in another.

in chief, penned an op-ed entitled, “American Intelligence – A Tradition of Mistakes.”⁵⁸⁸

Defense Minister Ehud Barak also dismissed the NIE, saying that Israelis “cannot allow ourselves to rest just because of an intel report from the other side of the earth.”

Avigdor Lieberman, the Strategic Affairs Minister, was equally dismissive, invoking the uncertainty theme by claiming that “No one knows when Iran will have the bomb.”⁵⁸⁹

The manipulation of uncertainty contrasted with the certitude of those who had invested significant personal capital and credibility in the existence of the Iran threat. They were unwilling to be proven wrong.

D. Prelude to Populism

The NIE came out at a particularly awkward time for Israeli leaders. The politicians had appeared to succeed in carving out a space for rare political agreement over the outlines of the Iran threat narrative. In addition, Israel’s academic and policy community had recently joined the conversation in support of this endeavor. For example, in 2007 The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) published 19 reports on Iran, a new high.⁵⁹⁰ In the Knesset, speeches by Labor members had become nearly indistinguishable from those of more conservative party members.⁵⁹¹ There was general

⁵⁸⁸ Amos Regev, ‘מסורת של טעויות - האמריקני’, *Israel Hayom*, 5 December 2007.

⁵⁸⁹ Prime Minister Olmert was more diplomatic in his response, stopping short of directly questioning the intelligence findings of an important strategic ally. He nevertheless reaffirmed his commitment to “prevent Iran from attaining [nuclear] capability.” Gil Hoffman, Yaakov Katz, and Herb Keinon, ‘Lieberman: No One Knows When Iran Will Have the Bomb. “We Cannot Allow Ourselves to Rest Just Because of an Intel Report from the Other Side of the Earth,” Barak Says’, *Jerusalem Post*, 5 December 2007.

⁵⁹⁰ It rose steadily in the following years: first to 36 in 2009, then 40 in 2012, eventually peaking at 54 in 2015. The only year with a decrease during this period was in 2011. ‘Publications Archive’, Institute for National Security Studies, accessed 17 July 2018, <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/>.

⁵⁹¹ In a session in July, Labor MK Danny Yatom and Strategic Affairs Minister Avigdor Lieberman of Yisrael Beiteinu exchanged ideas about the dangers posed by Iran; both agreed that Iran was a menace to Israel and the entire world. 44th Meeting of the 17th Knesset’, 11 July 2007, Knesset Transcripts.

agreement that Iran was an increasingly dangerous opponent and that the next conflict was right around the corner. Most thought, although not all admitted publicly, that the government's containment policy of working to build an international consensus for the imposition of economic sanctions would prove inadequate in reducing the threat.

Meanwhile, although it had been brief, the Lebanon war nonetheless provided the catalyst for new ideas and additional actions from politicians. Everyone wanted to be part of the solution, even if it meant offering symbolic proposals. For example, a Kadima MK proposed adding Iran to an anti-infiltration statute that barred illegal entry into Israel from countries hostile to the national interest, a list that included Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. The amendment, adopted with only one dissenting vote,⁵⁹² was largely meaningless as illegal entry into Israel by Iranian citizens was not a real concern. Likud opposition leader Netanyahu advanced a more ambitious idea, demanding that the United States, among other countries, prevent the transfer of funds to companies that operate and invest in the Iranian private sector.⁵⁹³ According to Netanyahu, such companies, which were primarily located in Europe, deserved to be shunned by Israel and the United States to ensure that money does not indirectly reach "the Iranian death machine."⁵⁹⁴ Netanyahu and his colleagues knew it was highly unlikely the United States would boycott European companies doing business with Iranian firms not connected to the government. Nevertheless, these and similar moves demonstrated that most Israeli politicians wanted to be seen as doing something to counter the Iranian threat.

There were also curious indications that Israel was open to broader engagement with countries in the region based upon a shared opposition to Iran. Kadima Party leader

⁵⁹² '77th Meeting of the 17th Knesset', 25 July 2007, Knesset Transcripts.

⁵⁹³ '77th Meeting of the 17th Knesset'.

⁵⁹⁴ '77th Meeting of the 17th Knesset'.

Tzipi Livni floated a reference to “moderate countries of the region” with whom Israel might work to counter Iran. She did not clarify her meaning: was Israel seeking some commitment from the enemies of its enemy for joint action or was she simply highlighting Iran’s comparative extremism and its challenge to the region.⁵⁹⁵

The plethora of attention succeeded in demonstrably affecting the Israeli public’s perception of the Iran threat. An April 2008 poll showed that a plurality of Israelis (38%) chose the Iran nuclear program as the largest threat facing Israel.⁵⁹⁶ They ranked it ahead of concerns about a possible Arab-Israeli rebellion (17%) or ongoing struggles against the Palestinian population (12%).⁵⁹⁷ In one sense, the results were hardly surprising given the steady stream of fear-producing speeches and reports coming from many different sources. It is understandable that the threat of imminent mass destruction would capture the public’s imagination more than would intermittent terrorist attacks. On the other hand, the response was remarkable given that the factual predicate for the fear had been seriously challenged by United States intelligence analysts’ claims that Iran had ended its weapons production program.

Significantly, the NIE had also contradicted Washington’s Iran narrative.⁵⁹⁸ A month after the report’s release, President Bush travelled to Israel to reaffirm the

⁵⁹⁵ Though Livni did not specify which countries she meant, she was likely referring to Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations. The idea of “moderate” Arab countries opposing Iran eventually became a common theme of Israeli discourse. ‘Cabinet Meeting Minutes’, 14 January 2007, Israeli Prime Minister’s Office.

⁵⁹⁶ Demographically, threat perception of Iran was higher among older respondents as well as among the less religious. Men tended to view Iran as a greater threat to Israel’s security than women. Ephraim Yaar and Tamar Hermann, ‘The Peace Index’ (The Israel Democracy Institute, August 2008), <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonthEng.aspx?mark1=&mark2=&num=22>.

⁵⁹⁷ The second biggest threat – the unpreparedness of the IDF for war -- was also notable in that it reflected a growing unease, especially among younger respondents, about the IDF’s military capabilities. The authors of the report attributed this trend to the military’s struggles in the 2006 Lebanon campaign. Yaar and Hermann.

⁵⁹⁸ U.S. President George W. Bush called the report “eye popping,” and said that the report “had a big impact – and not a good one.” Gregory Treverton, ‘Support to

American commitment to protect Israel from Iran. With the Iranian issue topping the agenda, Bush and Olmert both sought to portray Iran as a continuing threat. In their joint press conference, Olmert explained, “The President of the largest power in the world, the most important power in the world, is standing right here, and he has said in no uncertain terms that Iran was a threat and remains a threat.”⁵⁹⁹

Notwithstanding their rhetoric, all world leaders had been put on notice that there were serious doubts about the key components of the Iran threat narrative. At a minimum, the NIE challenged the warning that Iran’s production of a deadly bomb intended for Israel was imminent. Thus, if Iran was to remain atop Israel’s foreign policy and military concerns, the nature of this threat needed to expand beyond the scope of weapons of mass destruction. The obvious choice was to enlarge the narrative.

The debate spawned by the NIE over the imminence of the Iran threat provided the hardliners with a wedge issue to separate their position from those who were inclined to turn their security concerns elsewhere. Thus, Netanyahu, as a leader of the opposition interested in returning to power, seized the opportunity to construct a version of the Iran threat narrative that would enhance its appeal to a conservative base. As he prepared his run for Prime Minister, he creatively linked the present government’s pursuit of a comprehensive peace plan with the prospect that a divided Jerusalem would invite Iran to fill the vacuum left by Israeli withdrawal. He suggested that a weak Palestinian government would allow Hamas, under the direction of Iran, to

Policymakers: The 2007 NIE on Iran’s Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities’ (Central Intelligence Agency Center for the Study of Intelligence, May 2013), <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/csi-intelligence-and-policy-monographs/pdfs/support-to-policymakers-2007-nie.pdf>.

⁵⁹⁹ ‘Cabinet Meeting Minutes’, 13 January 2008, Israeli Prime Minister’s Office.

operate freely within Israel's borders.⁶⁰⁰ This injection of Iran into domestic politics hit many of the resonant proverbial buttons that provoked Israeli fears. It spoke to Israelis' concerns for their immediate personal safety from unpredictable terrorist attacks. It also invoked the emotional issue of the fate of Jerusalem, which spoke to Jews worldwide. Finally, it raised disturbing visions of Israel's future. Netanyahu insisted that Iran was the enemy behind every foreign policy of concern to the political movement he sought to build.

VI. Conclusion

The election of Barak Obama as the 44th President of the United States on November 4, 2008 marked the beginning of a new era of Israeli-U.S. relations. For the previous eight years, Israel had worked closely with the George W. Bush administration to reshape the Middle East. Israeli leaders had encouraged the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the removal of Saddam Hussein from power. They had also pressed for increased action against Iran, but on that front, Israel could only claim partial victory. Although the U.S. supported imposing increasingly stricter economic sanctions against Iran, it had stopped short of endorsing military action against the other Middle Eastern member of the "Axis of Evil."

Iran had changed in important ways during this era as well. The invasion of Iraq had strengthened Iran's strategic position in the region. The toppling of Saddam Hussein effectively eliminated a principal enemy that had checked Iran's activity along its western border, and it enabled Iran to exert influence on Iraq's newly empowered Shia

⁶⁰⁰ As Israeli forces bombarded Gaza City during Operation Cast Lead, Netanyahu stressed that Hamas must be removed from the Gaza strip. "Israel cannot tolerate an Iranian base next to its cities," he said. Damien McElroy, 'Fighting Rages as Gaza Strip Death Toll Nears 1000', 14 January 2009, sec. World, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/4236793/Benjamin-Netanyahu-says-Hamas-must-be-removed-from-Gaza.html>.

majority. Domestic politics in Iran had taken a hard turn to the right with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president in 2005, the consequences of which did not benefit Iranians at home or abroad. In Ahmadinejad's anti-Semitic and threatening rhetoric, Israeli leaders found an avatar for the Iran they pictured and propagated in their threat narrative.

Israel's case for taking extraordinary action against Iran to reduce or eliminate the threat, however, met with mixed success. Some national leaders amplified their condemnation of the nation or its leaders, and the international community imposed economic sanctions; but Israel did not succeed in excluding Iran from the United Nations or barring Ahmadinejad's recognition as a head of state. The West was not only reluctant to consider military action, but also world leaders would not rule out seeking a diplomatic solution to reduce the threat of a nuclear armed Iran.

The agents promoting the Iran threat narrative met with more success at home, meaning that it permeated Israeli political discourse and resonated with large segments of Israel society. Politicians, opinion leaders, the media, and popular culture sources fueled the public's imagination, offering doomsday scenarios that incited feelings of fear and insecurity. Experts, military officials, and other respected establishment figures added details, such as the imminence of Iran's bomb production, the dishonesty of the Iranian regime, the justification for taking active measures against Iran, and importantly, the options for action.

Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 2006 demonstrated the power and adaptability of the Iran narrative. Israeli political and military leaders turned an ill-conducted military campaign with an unsatisfying outcome into a validation and escalation of the threat posed by Iran. In the aftermath of the war, many Israeli leaders skillfully modified the narrative. By identifying Iran rather than Hezbollah as the enemy, Israel concretized for

its public the danger of Iran as something more than a probable bomb producer whose anti-Semitic leader espouses bombastic threats. The war also served as a precedent for holding Iran responsible for any belligerent action perpetrated against Israel. Hence, when Israel went to war in Gaza two years later, a chorus of Israeli leaders joined in blaming Iran.⁶⁰¹ This not only reaffirmed and expanded the narrative, it highlighted for the public the consequences of inaction against Iran.⁶⁰²

The narrative manifested its durability when the Israeli public continued to identify Iran as the top security threat despite the fact that the United States' NIE concluded that Iran was no longer developing nuclear weapons. While many, if not most, Israelis dismissed the NIE as incorrect, sustaining the public's fear of imminent existential danger nevertheless required reshaping the narrative. Given the challenges associated with new developments in a continually changing social, political, and international environment, a skillful politician who succeeded in crafting a salient narrative could also succeed in promoting himself and his agenda. Such a politician would need both a compelling narrative and a political strategy. The following chapter examines how Benjamin Netanyahu, operating as a populist, sought to securitize Iran's place on Israel's policy agenda.

⁶⁰¹ Prime Minister Olmert told his cabinet that Hamas was "acting as the arm of Iran" in Gaza. Cabinet Meeting Notes, May 11, 2008. Israeli media followed Olmert's lead and assigned Iran the blame for the violence. Columnist Caroline Glick wrote, "Here it is important to note that the war today, like the war in 2006, is a war between Israel and Iran." 'Cabinet Meeting Minutes', 11 May 2008, Israeli Prime Minister's Office; Caroline Glick, 'Iran's Gazan Diversion?', *Jerusalem Post*, 6 January 2009.

⁶⁰² Years later a RAND Corporation study on the Israeli-Iranian conflict observed "Israelis have developed a siege mentality in the wake of the rocket attacks following the Lebanon and then Gaza withdrawals." It predicted, "Because Israelis believed that they will be blamed no matter what they do, more defiant positions are likely, even toward the United States." Dalia Dassa Kaye, *Israel and Iran: A Dangerous Rivalry*, Rand Corporation Monograph Series (Santa Monica, CA: RAND National Defense Research Institute, 2011).

Chapter Five: Populist Securitization

I. Introduction: Reimagining the Threat

In 2009 Benjamin Netanyahu took his recrafted Iran narrative to the voters wrapped in a promise that he would restore Israelis' perception of safety, which, he claimed, had been compromised by his predecessors. In his run for this second term as prime minister, his banner claimed "Netanyahu: strong on security, strong on economy."⁶⁰³ Although his Likud Party narrowly lost the popular vote, he got the opportunity to assemble a coalition government when the more liberal candidate, Tzipi Livni of Kadima, failed in her efforts to do so. Netanyahu set out to recruit hardline conservative and religiously-affiliated parties, together with the hawkish Labor party led by Ehud Barak, to join him in governing the country.⁶⁰⁴

Since Netanyahu continued his practice of constructing messages aimed at Israelis' feelings of insecurity, his Iran narrative, which he had spent much of his political life developing, did not significantly change. He continued to accord the Islamic Republic a prominent role in his promotion of fear, and he maintained that the Iranian regime threatened Israel's continued existence.⁶⁰⁵ As a politician, Netanyahu's abiding belief in the Iranian threat was likely not due to a stubborn insistence on consistency as much as it was to evidence suggesting that the message resonated with Israeli voters.

Developments in the interim between his first and second terms as prime minister conditioned Israelis to be more receptive to Netanyahu's rhetoric. During this period

⁶⁰³ Several competing political parties shared the imperative to protect Israel's national security. Shmuel Sandler, Manfred Gerstenfeld, and Hillel Frisch, *Israel at the Polls 2009* (Routledge, 2013), 24.

⁶⁰⁴ This coalition included Yisrael Beitenu, the ultra-orthodox Shas party, the Jewish Home Party, and later United Torah Judaism. Netanyahu also secured the support of Labor. Led by Ehud Barak, it had secured 13 seats in the new Knesset.

⁶⁰⁵ See discussion in Chapter Three on the development of this narrative.

Israelis had experienced two wars, a second Intifada, and periodic incidents of violence both within and along its borders. Israelis had internalized the fear associated with uncertainty, most especially that they could be victims of violence, whether it took the form of a random terrorist attack or a nuclear bomb dropped by Iran on their country. Not surprisingly, a leader's promise of relief from enduring fear offered an assurance of security that many chose to embrace. Whether or not an Israeli had voted for Netanyahu's party, she accepted that he was now the prime minister and hoped he could deliver on his promises.

As a national leader, Netanyahu again commanded a global megaphone for disseminating his message, making it harder for world leaders and world Jewry to ignore. In a world beset by the specter of terrorists acquiring weapons of mass destruction, a masterfully constructed narrative about the nuclear threat posed by an accused state sponsor of terrorism resonated with more than Israelis. No world leader could afford to dismiss the scenario, and, in particular, the American political establishment took it seriously.⁶⁰⁶ Iran had not dispelled its image as a member of the Axis of Evil, and it had acquired few international friends.⁶⁰⁷ For Netanyahu, promoting suspicion at home and with certain audiences abroad did not prove difficult.

At home, the Iranian threat served two purposes. First, by occupying a place atop Israel's national security agenda, it distracted attention from more divisive foreign policy issues, most notably territorial concessions associated with seeking peace with the Palestinians. It also enabled Netanyahu to project his capability as a leader. Having

⁶⁰⁶ For a number of reasons, not all of which had to do with the facts on the ground, the message particularly resonated with politically conservative Americans, who were long-time political and financial supporters of Netanyahu. Pfeffer, *Bibi*.

⁶⁰⁷ Historical Gallup polling trends indicate that Iran's annual average unfavorability rating never dropped below 79% between 1990 and 2015. 'Gallup In Depth: Iran', Gallup.com, 2018, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/116236/Iran.aspx>.

not received a majority of votes, he needed to demonstrate support for his leadership. Consequently, Netanyahu's recrafting of the Iran threat narrative was neither extemporaneous nor random. As this chapter will examine, Netanyahu chose both tropes and strategies to optimize its impact. These choices were consistent with his adoption of populist messaging to intensify the receptivity of the Iran threat narrative. In so doing, his behavior exemplifies the populist securitization theory that frames this project.

Deconstruction of Netanyahu's Iran messaging reveals the ways in which the prime minister utilized a populist strategy within a securitization process to build and sustain the threat narrative during his second term. He recreated and reinvigorated a threat narrative that could not be minimized by his political opponents nor be resolved through compromise. In his telling, Netanyahu's leadership drew strength by fanning the flames of conflict with two different opponents: first, the enemy itself, namely Iran and its proxies; and second, those who would disagree with him. Utilizing both creative content and strategic delivery opportunities, he targeted audiences that would actively embrace both the message and the messenger.

II. Netanyahu's Messaging

Netanyahu built his support for Israel's Iran policy using rhetorical tropes that aimed at eliciting emotional responses from his listeners. With the emphasis on listeners' perceptions, Netanyahu was less troubled by the accuracy of his words. Through the use of hyperbole, passion, innuendo, and historical revisionism, among other techniques, he sought to create an incontrovertible fear of Iran's targeting Israel for destruction. Netanyahu succeeded in advancing a narrative in which the Iranian threat morphed from a significant, but largely manageable, security challenge into a mortal threat to the nation's existence. Although it is unlikely that everyone in his

targeted audience believed him, a sufficiently large swath of influential Israelis, world Jewry, and Western political leaders acted as if they agreed.

Netanyahu constructed his Iranian narrative using three principal tropes that illustrate a populist approach toward his objective of securitizing the threat as existential, which requires an extraordinary response. First, Netanyahu set up Israel's conflict with Iran as a moral crusade.⁶⁰⁸ In his telling, the clash between the two nations represented a struggle between a morally superior democratic state fighting for its survival and a depraved and untrustworthy regime that should not be allowed to participate in the community of nations. Moreover, those Israelis questioning the legitimacy of the threat would be setting themselves apart from the struggle to ensure that good triumphs over evil. Based upon this characterization, his second trope then highlighted the crisis associated with the struggle, appealing to the fear aroused by the uncertainty of Iran's plans for attacking Israel. Finally, he positioned himself as uniquely qualified to lead this modern crusade against the would-be destroyer.

His leadership drew power from the unity occasioned by Israelis' shared fear. He offered a distinctive voice by insisting that resolution of the threat required extraordinary measures against the evil perpetrator. He was the leader of Israelis who feared that world leaders could be duped into believing that conventional means, such as diplomacy and compromise, would reduce the danger. He gave voice to those who saw appeasers as opponents of Israel. While his appeal to international leaders for direct action was largely tactical posturing, as he knew he was unlikely to secure support for military intervention, he projected Israel's resolute strength. Regardless of political disagreements on other issues, few questioned his muscular Iranian policy. Connecting

⁶⁰⁸ See *ante*, Chapter 5, Part V, Section B for discussion of how Netanyahu carried out his morality crusade.

with a polity unified by a morally-branded crisis, he could withstand the criticism by professed experts, including professional analysts and political opponents within Israel's military and national security establishments. Perceptions of fear overtook factual analysis.

I will examine below how each of these tropes served Netanyahu's policy objectives. Taken together, they exemplify how Netanyahu not only skillfully constructed a securitization narrative, but also crafted a populist message built upon Israel's security vulnerability. Before turning to this analysis, it is helpful to examine two features of the political environment in which Netanyahu delivered his message. In the next subsection, I note how Netanyahu's messaging addressed two ancillary policy goals, both of which served and were served by his Iran narrative. In addition, following this introduction, I discuss the events in Iran at the time of Netanyahu's ascent and how they facilitated the salience of Netanyahu's threat narrative.

Netanyahu's messaging suggests two goals that help explain our understanding of his obsessive focus on Iran.⁶⁰⁹ One involved distracting Israelis' attention from the more divisive Palestinian issues. This was part of Netanyahu's strategy for political survival. A second goal sought to change the image of Israel from an occupier and aggressor to that of the victim of Iranian perfidy, by which Netanyahu sought to strengthen his entreaties for international allies. To be sure, his principal tropes were crafted to emphasize the threat and his leadership served these ends, but he added particular messages that suggest his deliberate pursuit of these related aims.

⁶⁰⁹ In December 2017, Netanyahu publicly acknowledged the perception of his Iran obsession. In a video message to the Saban Forum in Washington, DC, he jokingly remarked, "Today, I want to talk about a topic that I almost never bring up: Iran." Benjamin Netanyahu, *Benjamin Netanyahu's Remarks for the Saban Forum, 2017*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=9&v=3M-dvKOqQUJ.

To support his claim for the primacy of Iran on Israel's foreign policy agenda, Netanyahu offered a comparative threat assessment. Accordingly, the Palestinian terrorist threat rested on the randomness and uncertainty of the violence. That Israelis perceived terrorists could strike anywhere at any time was disruptive and emotionally upsetting, but, Netanyahu indicated, such attacks did not endanger the integrity and stability of the Israeli state. Terrorism as currently experienced did not compare to the potential of a life-ending nuclear attack. Moreover, because a nuclear Iran held the prospect of substantial and lasting destruction, all Israelis should unite behind his leadership to prevent this catastrophic fate.

Netanyahu carried a similar message to world leaders. For example, in his first meeting after his reelection with President Obama, he sought to put Iran atop the agenda while downplaying the Palestinian issue. Netanyahu spoke at length about the "worst danger we face is that Iran would develop nuclear military capabilities." At the end he acknowledged it would "help" to reach a Palestinians settlement so that Israel and the Palestinians, who would also face danger in the event of an Israeli war with Iran, could present a united front against Iran.⁶¹⁰

Taking this message to the world, Netanyahu portrayed Israel as the victim of Iranian genocidal intentions. He occasionally returned to his older claim that Iranian leaders considered Israel a "one bomb" country, likely referring to Rafsanjani's 2001 Quds Day speech described in Chapter Three. For example, in 2010 he told a gathering of American Jews that "It's instructive that the ingathering of Jews doesn't deter [the Iranians]. In fact, it whets their appetite."⁶¹¹

⁶¹⁰ 'Remarks During Meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama', 18 May 2009, Israeli Prime Minister's Office.

⁶¹¹ Benjamin Netanyahu, 'Prime Minister Netanyahu's Speech at the AIPAC Conference', 22 March 2010, Israeli Prime Minister's Office.

Israel's victimization by Iran was more serious than the struggle over contested territory. Could nations really afford to ignore the threat posed by a nuclear Iran to Israel and by extension to other civilized nations?⁶¹² Netanyahu sought not only to marginalize Palestinian peace initiatives, but also to deflect criticism of Israel's aggressive responses to terror attacks by connecting both policies to the Iranian threat. He maintained that Israel could not afford any additional uncertainty or changes in its behavior, which would accompany an investment in negotiations.

Netanyahu's leadership at home and abroad depended upon dispelling the idea of equivalency between Iran and the Palestinian issues. Israel might lose control of the narrative on the plight of the Palestinians, but he dared his opponents to contest his accusations against the Iranian regime.

* * *

In the next section, I examine the political environment during Netanyahu's initial years in office. This factual predicate also reveals the space between the reality of Iran's actions and Netanyahu's characterization of them. It is also instructive to note one extraordinary venture reportedly launched against Iran by Israel and the United States. Ironically, Netanyahu had nothing to say about the action and it never became part of his narrative.

III. Iran's Facilitation and Contradiction

A. Ahmadinejad the Facilitator

As Netanyahu assumed the mantle of power in 2009, Iran projected a complex and perplexing image to the world. Iran's transition, albeit slow, into a post-Revolutionary society with a highly educated population of mostly young people and an

⁶¹² As will be examined *infra*, Netanyahu would develop this into a claim that there exists a "clash of civilizations" between Iran and the civilized world.

electoral process that gave voters choices, albeit limited, clashed with the lingering perception of a brutal theocratic police state. But for the coincidence of Netanyahu's return to power in Israel and the controversial reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Iran's president in 2009, Netanyahu might have had to modify his message.⁶¹³ Instead, Ahmadinejad's antics provided Netanyahu with considerable material for intensifying his warning of impending doom.⁶¹⁴

By the time Netanyahu assumed office, Ahmadinejad had already established himself as a bloviating contrarian. On the international stage, he was the source of derision and ridicule. He trafficked in conspiracy theories, openly questioning the historical accuracy of the Holocaust, as well as the American account of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. In 2006, he had hosted the International Conference to Review the Global Vision of the Holocaust, which brought together some of the world's most prominent Holocaust deniers and revisionists, including the American white supremacist and former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard, David Duke.⁶¹⁵

Ahmadinejad was also not particularly popular among Iranians. During his first term his administration bungled attempts at economic stimulus, and the disastrous distribution of direct cash payments led to widespread inflation and unemployment.⁶¹⁶ The government's economic mismanagement and perceived wide-spread corruption

⁶¹³ Yaakov Katz, editor-in-chief of *The Jerusalem Post*, former top advisor to Jewish Home party head Naftali Bennett, and author of a book on Israel's conflict with Iran, said in an interview that Ahmadinejad was one of Israel's great public relations victories. Interview with Yaakov Katz; Katz and Hendel, *Israel vs. Iran*.

⁶¹⁴ See *ante*, Chapter 4, Part IV, Section A for an analysis of how Ahmadinejad increased the interest of Israeli media in Iran.

⁶¹⁵ Daniel Schorr, 'Iran Further Isolates Itself with "Holocaust Denial"', *Weekend Edition* (National Public Radio, 17 December 2006), <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6637685>.

⁶¹⁶ Nader Habibi, 'The Economic Legacy of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad', *Middle East Brief*, no. 74 (June 2013), <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB74.pdf>.

had sparked occasional protests and riots.⁶¹⁷ This was one indication of an emerging post-Revolutionary society. While economic sanctions imposed by the United States and its Western allies made it difficult for the government to provide sustainable relief to its citizens, they also enabled Ahmadinejad to disclaim responsibility and to shift the blame elsewhere.⁶¹⁸ Ahmadinejad targeted the United States and Israel as scapegoats for Iran's economic woes in an effort to unite Iranians against foreign powers.⁶¹⁹ Using a strategy common among insecure leaders, he frequently and publicly attacked the two nations so as to distract attention from his corruption and unpopularity. Given Ahmadinejad's unpopularity, it was not surprising that accusations of fraud accompanied his reelection. What was unexpected, however, was that his victory generated public protests, including a nascent opposition movement that came to be known as the Green Revolution.⁶²⁰ This complicated the outsider's traditional perceptions of Iran: Since Iran was not a democracy, one would not expect the manipulation of election results to spur dissent. Although Ahmadinejad led a violent government crackdown on the protesters, which resulted in several dozen deaths and thousands of arrests, the incident suggested the presence of active unrest in Iranian society, which might be emboldened by international condemnation.

⁶¹⁷ For example, in 2007 a surprise announcement by the government that it would begin gasoline rationing led to the burning of twelve gas stations in Tehran. 'Iran Fuel Rations Spark Violence', 27 June 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6243644.stm.

⁶¹⁸ Thomas Erdbrink, 'Ahmadinejad of Iran Ties Currency Drop to Sanctions', *The New York Times*, 2 October 2012, sec. Middle East, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/03/world/middleeast/iran-president-mahmoud-ahmadinejad-ties-currency-drop-to-sanctions.html>.

⁶¹⁹ In one highly publicized incident, he blamed the U.S. for orchestrating the 9/11 attacks as part of an effort to aid Israel. Ed Pilkington, 'Ahmadinejad Accuses US of "orchestrating" 9/11 Attacks to Aid Israel', *The Guardian*, 23 September 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/23/iran-unitednations>.

⁶²⁰ Green was the campaign color of the opposition candidates, Mir Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi.

Ahmadinejad further complicated the perception of Iran's government as a unitary militant theocracy when later in his second term he publicly questioned the power of the country's ruling religious establishment.⁶²¹ His criticism not only reflected a division within Iran's government leadership, but also echoed the discontent of many Iranians.⁶²² This disunion did not resolve. In 2012, Iran's parliament, the Majlis, in a historic move, summoned Ahmadinejad to answer questions concerning his presidency.⁶²³ Any foreign government or analyst monitoring developments in Iran might find in such action reasons to reconsider policy options.

Netanyahu, however, did not acknowledge the nuances, choosing instead to view Ahmadinejad as validating the narrative of Iranian fanaticism. When asked by an American television reporter during the protests whether the election was a fraud, Netanyahu seized the opportunity to vilify "the Iranian regime" and belittle the idea that Iran has meaningful elections.⁶²⁴ In multiple interviews over the ensuing two weeks, he stressed the "true nature" of the Iranian regime, its lack of legitimacy, and its threat to world peace. Netanyahu cited the protests and the government response as further evidence of the truth of the criticisms he had advanced during his days as opposition leader: "This is a regime that represses its own people, supports terrorism worldwide

⁶²¹ Neil MacFarquhar, 'A Divine Wind Blows Against Iran's President', *The New York Times*, 22 June 2011, sec. Middle East, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/23/world/middleeast/23iran.html>.

⁶²² Jamsheed K. Choksy, 'Tehran Politics: Are the Mullahs Losing Their Grip?', *World Affairs Journal*, June 2012, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/tehran-politics-are-mullahs-losing-their-grip>.

⁶²³ Saeed Kamali Dehghan, 'Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Summoned to Parliament', *The Guardian*, 14 March 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2012/mar/14/iran-ahmadinejad-appears-parliament>; 'Ahmadinejad Critic Named Speaker', *BBC News*, 5 June 2012, sec. Middle East, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18328882>.

⁶²⁴ Netanyahu insisted, "It's a totalitarian state that perhaps has elections on occasion." Benjamin Netanyahu, Benjamin Netanyahu Interview: Full Text, interview by Jeff Glor, 15 June 2009, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/benjamin-netanyahu-interview-full-text/>.

and openly denies the Holocaust, while calling for the elimination of Israel. This regime is not only a great threat to our existence, but also to moderate Arab countries, the safety of Europe and to the peace in the world.”⁶²⁵

Ahmadinejad’s most valuable contribution to Netanyahu’s messaging was his Holocaust denialism. Netanyahu’s rhetoric had often suggested a link between the Nazis’ extermination of the Jews and the intent of the Iranian regime. Thus, Ahmadinejad’s invoking of the Holocaust, even if to deny it, highlighted Netanyahu’s message. Israelis had adopted a rallying cry of “Never Again” to remember and respond to the murder of six million Jews during World War II. Over the years the meaning had expanded from maintaining an aggressive defensive posture to repel or discourage an attack on Jews to engaging in preemptive actions to prevent an attack. Most likely both Ahmadinejad and Netanyahu saw the Holocaust denial as provocation.

As reprehensible as such behavior is, not all those espousing such hate merit the same attention to their utterances. While grounds for condemnation, the hateful speech is not always deserving of official denunciations.⁶²⁶ Arguably, there are times when expressing a serious outrage can prove counterproductive if the espouser is accorded more serious attention than he would otherwise merit. Attacking those promoting anti-

⁶²⁵ Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Iran: Statements by Israeli Leaders-June 2009’, 22 June 2009, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/Iran/Pages/Iran-Statements_Israeli_leaders-June_2009.aspx.

⁶²⁶ Context matters. For example, in Germany, Holocaust denialism is a public offense, which protects against certain factions’ disavowing the country’s Nazi past. In America, the speech of pseudo-academics, publicity seekers, and aspiring leaders of ultra-right political organizations is protected from prosecution if it is not intended to incite violence. When an avowed white supremacist ran for political office in the American state of Louisiana, the condemnation by the Jewish community of his anti-Semitic remarks often brought him the media attention he craved. In many instances, leaders of the African-American community refused to respond to his racist remarks arguing that public action would enhance the candidate’s profile. John Maginnis, *Cross to Bear* (Pelican Publishing Company, Inc., 2011), 28.

Semitic messages is thus a strategic decision. In some cases, unified condemnation accompanied by protest actions against the messenger can achieve productive results. It can also expose an advocate of anti-Semitic messages as a fraud or buffoon more deserving of ridicule than serious condemnation. In the latter case, continuing denunciation of such a fool prolongs the attention accorded to the individual, potentially obscuring other developments.

While it is understandable that Israel is excruciatingly sensitive to national leaders who deny the Holocaust, Netanyahu's use of Ahmadinejad's pronouncements demonstrated no strategic thinking. Instead, he argued that it validated his claim that Iran was intent on destroying Israel.⁶²⁷ Ignoring the buffoonery of Ahmadinejad's publicity-seeking behavior, Netanyahu merged the Holocaust denialism and Iran's determination to exterminate the Jewish State to increase the resonance of his narrative with Jewish audiences. There is no evidence that Netanyahu considered whether the validation of Ahmadinejad's pronouncements added long term value to Israel's position.⁶²⁸ Netanyahu ran the risk that if Iran's leadership changed, his message could lose its salience. By overreliance on the analogy between the Nazi and Iranian leaders, he risked finding himself as isolated as the target of his accusations. Conversely, the

⁶²⁷ The most prominent example of this occurred shortly after Netanyahu took office in 2009 during his address to the United Nations General Assembly. In that speech, Netanyahu drew a direct comparison to the Nazis, saying, "And like the belated victory over the Nazis, the forces of progress and freedom will prevail only after an [sic] horrific toll of blood and fortune has been extracted from mankind. That is why the greatest threat facing the world today is the marriage between religious fanaticism and the weapons of mass destruction. The most urgent challenge facing this body is to prevent the tyrants of Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons." Benjamin Netanyahu, 'Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Speech to the UN General Assembly', (24 September 2009), <http://www.haaretz.com/news/prime-minister-benjamin-netanyahu-s-speech-to-the-un-general-assembly-1.7254>.

⁶²⁸ Some argued that Ahmadinejad's behavior added to his image of buffoonery and belied his dangerousness.

fixation on Holocaust denialism could raise the international profile of both men, with neither benefitting from the exposure.

In the end, it proved unimportant whether, as an objective matter, the Holocaust denial controversy enhanced the threat narrative. For the first four years of Netanyahu's second term as Prime Minister, Ahmadinejad's antics provided Netanyahu with numerous occasions for generating publicity. If he believed in the adage that for a politician no publicity is bad publicity, he could risk criticism by continuously citing Ahmadinejad's assertions when seeking to publicize his repetitive messages about the dangers of Iran. Moreover, few of the world powers voiced disagreement. A broad coalition of nations imposed a new round of economic sanctions on Iran. In 2010 and 2011 the United States and European Union adopted a series of measures which included completely cutting Iran off from the international banking system, thus disabling Iran from participating in international money transfers around the world.⁶²⁹ These measures increased Iran's already substantial economic problems and intensified domestic pressure on Ahmadinejad and his administration.

The danger in accusatory and inflammatory rhetoric is that the predictions become self-fulfilling. For Netanyahu, sanctions were an insufficient response. After nearly four years of intimidation and recriminations, Israeli leaders seriously considered starting a war with Iran. By 2012, they had developed plans for a preemptive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities. Reportedly, Israel scrapped the initiative when U.S. President Barack Obama refused to back such an operation.⁶³⁰

⁶²⁹ Philip Blenkinsop and Rachelle Younglai, 'Banking's SWIFT Says Ready to Block Iran Transactions', Reuters, 17 February 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-sanctions-swift/bankings-swift-says-ready-to-block-iran-transactions-idUSTRE81G26820120217>.

⁶³⁰ Adiv Sterman and Mitch Ginsburg, "'US Pressure Nixed Israeli Strike on Iran Last Year'", *The Times of Israel*, 3 September 2013, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/us-pressure-nixed-israeli-strike-on-iran-in-2012/>.

B. Rouhani's Contradiction

Few international leaders regretted the departure of Ahmadinejad from the world stage when Iranians voted in new leadership. By Iranian standards, Hassan Rouhani was a moderate cleric. As a career government official and former National Security Advisor, his narrow victory in the first round of balloting in June 2013 surprised observers. Rouhani campaigned on a platform that called for an end to Iran's international isolation, proposing to increase diplomatic engagement. Shortly after his inauguration, he thus began a global campaign to improve Iran's image. Dubbed by the international press as a "charm offensive," Rouhani stressed Iran's new moderate direction under his leadership, one that valued diplomatic and economic engagement over the boisterous threats of his predecessor.⁶³¹

These developments represented a direct challenge to Netanyahu's message. He had built his threat scenario by making Ahmadinejad the face of the "Islamic regime." The idea of a regime led by a madman enabled Netanyahu to enlist the international community in isolating Iran and to perpetuate the sense of crisis among Israelis. Rouhani did not just change Iran's rhetoric, he attended the World Economic Forum in Davos, where he again called for "constructive engagement" with the world.⁶³² Importantly, he invited the United States and its Western allies to negotiate a deal over Iran's nuclear

⁶³¹ Rouhani displayed the change in Iran's direction during his 2013 trip to New York. Ahead of his appearance at the United Nations, he published an op-ed in the *Washington Post* and sat for an interview with NBC news. He struck a notably moderate tone and vowed to "engage in constructive interaction with the world." Hassan Rouhani, 'President of Iran Hassan Rouhani: Time to Engage', *Washington Post*, 19 September 2013, sec. Opinions, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/president-of-iran-hassan-rouhani-time-to-engage/2013/09/19/4d2da564-213e-11e3-966c-9c4293c47ebe_story.html.

⁶³² Hassan Rouhani, 'President's Speech Addressing the 44th World Economic Forum' (23 January 2014), <http://www.president.ir/en/74125>.

program. That such an agreement might end the crippling economic sanctions was an anathema to Netanyahu's strategy.

Not surprisingly, Netanyahu and his supporters were unwilling to be charmed. While skepticism and suspicion of Iran were understandable, Israeli leaders were immediately dismissive. Within days of the election, Deputy Foreign Minister Zeev Elkin speaking in the Knesset called Iran a "joke of democracy." He claimed that the idea of Rouhani's election as a significant change in the country was "funny." Elkin attacked the new president's credibility, claiming that Rouhani had said that the best way to move forward with the Iranian nuclear program was to "delude the West" into thinking they were seriously negotiating while secretly continuing with its technological development.⁶³³ In general, the response to the Iranian elections from Israeli officials capitalized on uncertainty to advance worst-case scenarios that could not be refuted. Echoing the official distrust, Israeli media and policy outlets were similarly unwilling to give Iran the benefit of the doubt. News stories invoked *ad hominem* attacks, mockingly referring to "Rouhani and his shy, sweet smile" to question his sincerity. Israel arms control experts reminded officials to remain vigilant and determined "when your adversary is smiling."⁶³⁴

Rouhani's diplomatic demeanor required Israelis to pivot away from the Iranian president as an avatar of its governing regime. Without acknowledging the contradiction, commentators asserted that the post of president in the Islamic Republic was a figurehead rather than a chief executive. This new version was equally misleading.

⁶³³ '43rd Meeting of the 19th Knesset', 19 June 2013, Knesset Transcripts.

⁶³⁴ Lior Akerman, 'Rouhani and His Shy, Sweet Smile', *Jerusalem Post*, 22 November 2013; Emily B. Landau, 'After Round One with Rouhani: Staying Focused on the Dynamics of Nuclear Bargaining', INSS Insight (Institute for National Security Studies, 17 October 2013), <http://www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/No.%20477%20-%20Emily%20for%20web.pdf>.

By maintaining that the levers of political power rested entirely with the Iranian clerical establishment, it continued to ignore the complicated political dynamics at work in Iran as it transitioned from a revolutionary government to a post-revolutionary society.⁶³⁵ It overlooked the reality that Iran had a young and educated population contributing energetically and creatively to the development of a new society. It also attacked the legitimacy of diplomatic initiatives being pursued by Iran's newly-elected "figurehead."

In short, the departure of Ahmadinejad made Netanyahu's messaging far more difficult. The challenge involved more than coming up with a different factual predicate for maintaining his foreign policy and positioning himself as his nation's leader. It also eroded his ability to muster support from world leaders for isolating Iran and threatened to take military action off the table. Rouhani not only presented a different face, but his lower key manner opened space for the world to learn more about Iranian society. He made it tenable for international leaders to engage with Iran in a meaningful way. No longer did leaders risk embarrassment if they tried to negotiate with the unpredictable Ahmadinejad. Most importantly, the picture of Iran advanced by Rouhani offered little evidence that Iranians collectively shared the intention ascribed to their government of eradicating the Jewish state.

⁶³⁵ These oversimplified narratives of Iranian governance belie the complicated truth of the Iranian political system. In a comprehensive social survey of Iranian society, one of the few conducted through extensive fieldwork inside of Iran, Kevan Harris documents the social changes in Iran in the decades since the Islamic Revolution. He explains how societal pressure on the government to provide opportunities for upward mobility created by the state's welfare and social policy institutions – the mechanisms through which most Iranians relate to the state – have altered Iranians' view of the Islamic Republic. Iran's success in implementing social welfare programs for its citizens in the post-Revolutionary era expanded the middle class and provided citizens with opportunities for social advancement. Similarly, the fractious nature of the ruling elite, divided along a spectrum running from reformers to hardliners, underlined the importance of mass politics. At the very least, the book dismisses the notion of Iran as a fervently religious society dominated by clerics and devoted to Islamic law. Kevan Harris, *A Social Revolution: Politics and the Welfare State in Iran*, First edition (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017).

V. Netanyahu's Tropes

A. The Opening Act

“Making peace is harder than making war” according to the American statesman and former Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson. For an ambitious Israeli politician, advancing a vision of a peace agreement is a dangerous proposition given Israelis’ strong and vocal disagreements over what a regional peace should look like. The inability of Israel to reach a comprehensive peace with its neighbors meant that Israelis had lived in a state of emergency since the country’s founding. Unifying constituents against a shared threat to the status quo, no matter how fragile, was an easier strategy for a self-promoting leader than seeking agreement on land concessions and future promises. Benjamin Netanyahu, like many national leaders, promoted security as the top priority of his political agenda. Notably, he chose to use messages designed to make Israelis and world Jewry feel insecure.

For Netanyahu, an astute politician with a perfect command of English,⁶³⁶ his leadership position allowed him to follow the strategic path of elite Israelis who frequently address their messages to audiences abroad to enhance their receptivity at home.⁶³⁷ Focusing the world’s attention on Iran was more important than just building a domestic political base. If Israel was going to eliminate the threat, it would need allies to take action. Ideally, he sought the support of the leaders of Western nations, most

⁶³⁶ Netanyahu, who was raised in the United States, speaks English fluently with very little trace of an Israeli accent. He reportedly frequently uses English in conducting official government business, including cabinet meetings, since most of his advisors are also fluent English speakers. Pfeffer, *Bibi*.

⁶³⁷ A notable practice among Israeli academics is that they often choose to publish their work examining political issues in English before they do so in Hebrew. Interview with Yael Berda, interview by Jonathan Leslie, Email, 13 July 2018.

especially the president of the United States. He knew as well, however, that such leaders' positions can often be influenced by politically powerful Jewish interests.⁶³⁸

Significantly, on the day of his inauguration, Netanyahu chose an English language media outlet for his first interview of his second term as prime minister. Sitting down with *The Atlantic* magazine's Jeffrey Goldberg, he outlined his foreign policy vision and proposals for enhancing Israel's security. In retrospect, the interview provided a preview of the tropes that Netanyahu would invoke to support the objectives of his Iran policy. It also initiated Netanyahu's practice of directing Iran pronouncements to the English language press as well as using English in his social media messages. This practice signaled that he saw Western Jewry as a key constituency to be courted for support of his Iran strategy. Concomitantly, by emphasizing the existential risk posed by a nuclear Iran, Netanyahu could mute the criticisms of progressive Jews disturbed by some of Israel's controversial foreign and domestic policies, which were, by implication, "lesser concerns." By also maintaining that the danger extended to Western nations, he could broaden the base of fearful potential victims.

Netanyahu's use of domestic and foreign-based journalists created a synergy in which the awareness of each other's reporting and analyses on Iran intensified the attention accorded to Netanyahu's messages in Israel and around the world. In Israel, this strategy produced a feedback loop for the Iran debate: reporting on Netanyahu's claims elicited threats and counter threats from Iranian and Israel officials. This, in turn, generated additional reporting that escalated the Israeli-Iranian conflict, at times

⁶³⁸ The English language media coverage of Netanyahu's messages, both the interviews and speeches he gave to English language audiences and the reports in the English press about his statements and activities, is particularly instructive. Comparison of the English reports to those in the Hebrew press for Israeli audiences, however, are not materially different, although sometimes less extensive. The Hebrew press generally reported on significant English language speeches by the Prime Minister.

resembling a rhetorical war. As noted above, Israel came close to firing a “real” shot, but ultimately decided not to follow through on a military attack.⁶³⁹

The published remarks in *The Atlantic* focus primarily on two themes: First, the Iran threat is real and unprecedented; and second, the United States should honor its strong relationship with Israel by joining in some as-yet-undefined confrontation with Iran.⁶⁴⁰ Netanyahu stressed that complacency about Iran is dangerous, and he positioned himself to lead a response as well as to mute critics who questioned his foreign policy priorities and focus.

The one-on-one format with a familiar journalist enabled Netanyahu to control and expand upon his themes.⁶⁴¹ He used the occasion to test a populist strategy by focusing on the moral dimensions of the conflict. This is what Müller refers to as “the moral imagination of politics.”⁶⁴² In Netanyahu’s telling, both Israel and its prime minister were engaged in a moral crusade against a corrupt Iranian regime. This trope signaled a change between his approach to Iran during his first tenure as prime minister and the present.

In his first administration in the late 1990s, Iran had been a foreign policy issue, but not all Israelis saw it as the singular danger. Now, Netanyahu portrayed Israelis as on the front line of a clash of civilizations, defending not only themselves but the entire

⁶³⁹ See discussion at end of Section A, *infra*.

⁶⁴⁰ Significantly, the interview occurred just months before the U.S. and Israel reportedly launched a cyberattack on Iran’s nuclear facility, which may have been planned during Netanyahu’s first term. (See Appendix II) One could speculate that an additional aim of Netanyahu’s messaging to American audiences was to shore up approval for such an action should it come to public attention. It set a precedent for further joint aggressive operations against Iran.

⁶⁴¹ Netanyahu, a savvy observer of American media, had reason to believe Goldberg would produce sympathetic inaugural interview. Goldberg had emigrated from the United States to Israel and served as a prison guard in the IDF. As a journalist, he frequently penned articles attacking critics of the Jewish State and placed them in prominent publications.

⁶⁴² See Populist Securitization discussion in Chapter One.

Western world. As Western powers explored the possibility of diplomatic engagement, Netanyahu threatened preemptive military action. The interview was thus infused with Netanyahu's casting the struggle in terms of a moral deficit between the two combatants, and offering an apocalyptic vision. According to Netanyahu, Iran not only embraced a death wish, it willingly accepted its own destruction in its quest to destroy others. He claimed that Iran was a nation that "glorifies blood and death, including its own self-immolation."⁶⁴³

Engaging in hyperbole, he argued that Iran had been remorseless about the conduct of its eight-year war with Iraq. In Netanyahu's retelling, the great human cost of that conflict apparently meant nothing, since Iran had "wasted over a million lives without batting an eyelash." Despite having no knowledge or corroboration, he asserted that conflict "didn't sear a terrible wound into the Iranian consciousness."⁶⁴⁴ He claimed that Iran was not Britain after World War I, lapsing into pacifism because of the great tragedy of a loss of a generation.⁶⁴⁵ Netanyahu further asserted that Iran was not entitled to argue that it too had been a victim of enemy aggression or that it feared future attacks on its sovereignty. This enabled him to implicitly distinguish Iran's nuclear development program from Israel's entitlement to maintain a military arsenal. Israel, surrounded by enemies, needed weapons for defense, while Iran sought to acquire nuclear weapons to engage in immoral aggression. In subsequent statements, Netanyahu would dismiss as lies Iran's statements that it did not intend to build nuclear

⁶⁴³ Jeffrey Goldberg, 'Netanyahu to Obama: Stop Iran—Or I Will', *The Atlantic*, March 2009, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/03/netanyahu-to-obama-stop-iran-or-i-will/307390/>.

⁶⁴⁴ Anyone who visits Iran knows this to be false; memorials to individuals killed in the conflict are ubiquitous throughout the country.

⁶⁴⁵ Goldberg, 'Netanyahu to Obama'.

weapons. Instead, he would accuse Iran of acting deceptively, and attack those who believed Iran's leaders as being naïve or ignorant about Iran or Middle East politics.⁶⁴⁶

Consistent with his move toward populism, in the interview Netanyahu portrayed himself as likely the only politician willing to speak the ugly truth. He directly addressed the United States, although he likely knew that America would neither approve nor support military action against Iran. He nevertheless pressed his case that confronting Iran represented a "great mission," both for himself and President Barack Obama and that ridding the world of Iran's threat would serve as a "hinge of history" for the future of Western civilization. The rhetoric of glory and promise contrasted with an America weary from years of unproductive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a loosely defined "war on terror," and a financial crisis that made even the cost of posturing too expensive. In stating his case, Netanyahu did not address whether he expected President Obama, who had recently received the Nobel Peace Prize, to embrace a new conflict.

Whatever his doubts, Netanyahu was unwilling to abandon efforts to publicly pressure the United States for its support. In his first face-to-face meeting with President Obama in May 2009, which was shortly after both men had assumed office, he used Iran as the bargaining chip for his willingness to address the issue of negotiations with the Palestinians. In noncommittal language regarding the latter, he explained, "We

⁶⁴⁶ Netanyahu frequently called diplomacy with Iran a "mistake," and warned world leaders not to be taken in by Iran's "deception." He repeatedly stressed that Iran was only using negotiations as a cover for its bomb building intentions. An example of such claims is Netanyahu's response following Rouhani's address at Davos: "Rouhani has admitted that a decade ago, he deceived the West in order to advance the Iranian nuclear program. He is doing this today as well. The goal of the Iranian ayatollahs' regime, which is hiding behind Rouhani's smiles, is to ease sanctions without conceding on their program to produce nuclear weapons. Therefore, the international community must not go astray after this deception." Benjamin Netanyahu, 'Prime Minister Netanyahu's Remarks on Iranian President Rouhani's Davos Speech', 23 January 2014, Israeli Prime Minister's Office.

want to move simultaneously and then parallel on two fronts: the front of peace, and the front of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear capability.”⁶⁴⁷ Netanyahu probably understood that if President Obama remained unsympathetic, he might still rally American Jews, political conservatives, and those committed to opposing any position taken by President Obama. Such a collection of Israel supporters might pressure American legislators for a more robust commitment. The danger in Netanyahu’s strategy was the risk of alienating the new U.S. president, making him less receptive to Israel’s future entreaties and more willing to criticize Israeli actions toward the Palestinians. Moreover, if Netanyahu failed to muster significant international support, he could find himself isolated and excluded from discussions on Iran policies.

B. The Morality Crusade

Netanyahu aimed his morality-based anti-Iran messages at both international and domestic audiences. The basic trope was a simple message that pictured Iran as intent on doing evil; however, it carried complex implications. In his inauguration day interview Netanyahu spoke of Iran’s leaders as comprising a “messianic apocalyptic cult,” and he warned that “When the wide-eyed believer gets hold of the reins of power and the weapons of mass death, then the entire world should start worrying.”⁶⁴⁸ Later in the interview he added, “Since the dawn of the nuclear age, we have not had a fanatic regime that might put its zealotry above its self-interest.” Emphasizing the fear inherent in uncertainty, he warned, “People say that they’ll behave like any other nuclear power. Can you take the risk? Can you assume that?”⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁷ ‘Remarks During Meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama’.

⁶⁴⁸ Goldberg, ‘Netanyahu to Obama’.

⁶⁴⁹ Goldberg.

Implicit in his message is a challenge to world leaders not to remain silent in the face of an existential threat as did their predecessors during the Nazi extermination of the Jews. Thus, in his first speech to the United Nations General Assembly in fall 2009, Netanyahu admonished the world leaders for their willingness to listen and talk to Iran, as well as for their criticism of Israel. He challenged them by asking “Have you no shame?”⁶⁵⁰ Embedded in this trope was an anti-Islamic bias manifested in his choice of language. Addressing world leaders, he described Iran as “fueled by an extreme fundamentalism,” which “has swept the globe with a murderous violence and cold-blooded impartiality of its choice of victims.” He then warned that if this “most primitive fanaticism can acquire the most deadly weapons, the march of history could be reversed.”⁶⁵¹

Israeli columnists and editorial writers, especially the right-leaning *Jerusalem Post* and *Yisrael Hayom*, which regularly reported the Prime Minister’s speeches and comments, echoed and embellished the disparagement of Iran’s version of Islam. As an English language newspaper, the *Jerusalem Post* aimed to “inform” an international audience as well as resident immigrants, or *olim*. Many in the latter cohort had come to settle in Israel as committed religious Zionists but had not experienced security uncertainties. Reporters and opinion writers emphasized Netanyahu’s message regarding the zealous “mullahs” or “ayatollahs,” who comprised a messianic Iranian regime willing to pursue an apocalypse “with no concern for the millions of Iranians who would die in the conflagration.” A textual analysis of *Jerusalem Post* opinion pieces and choices of quotations from Israeli officials show a steady increase in usage of the terms

⁶⁵⁰ Netanyahu, ‘Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Speech to the UN General Assembly’.

⁶⁵¹ Netanyahu.

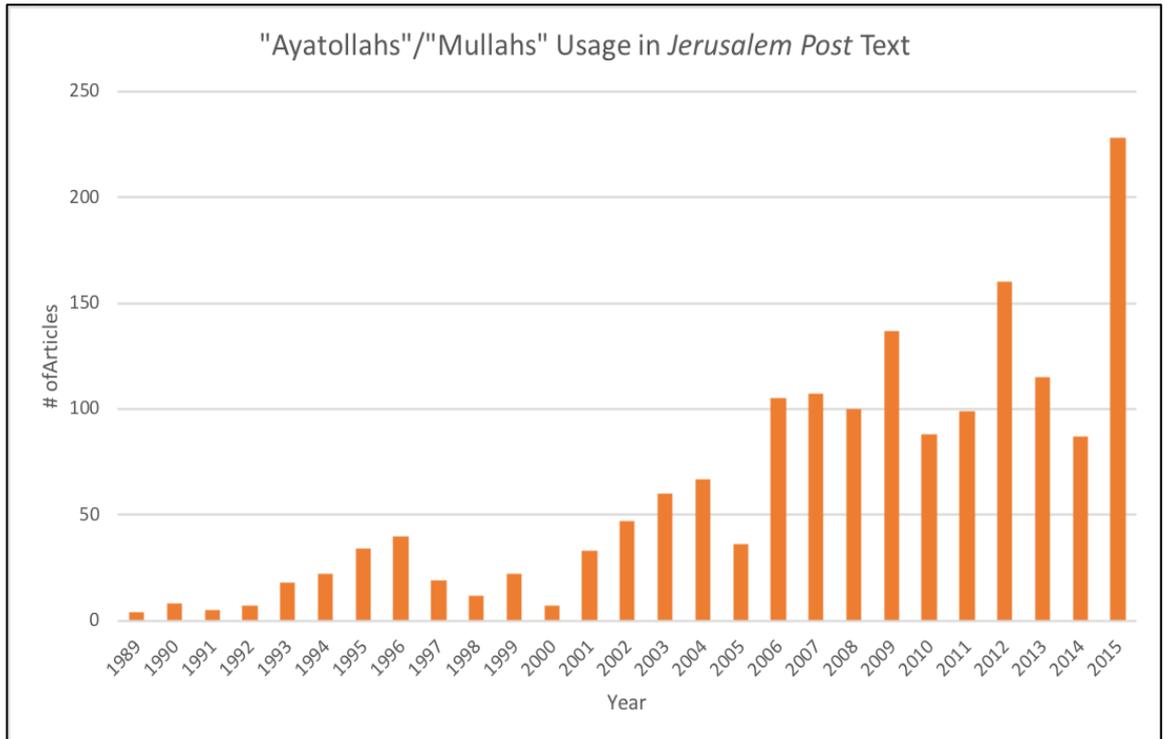
“Ayatollahs” and “Mullahs” to describe Iranian leadership beginning in 2001. (See Figure 4, next page.) It reached its peak (228 articles) in 2015.⁶⁵² This trend reflects Netanyahu’s effort to vilify Iran’s leadership even after the departure of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the initiation of negotiations with the Rouhani administration began to soften world opinion toward Iran.

Netanyahu’s critique of Iranian Islam served two purposes. It enabled him to distinguish between the ruling Islamic fundamentalists in Iran and the would-be theocrats in Israel who sought to impose religiously-based policies upon the secular population. It also allowed him to argue that any Iranian conciliatory statements, which appeared inconsistent with his portrait of extremism, could not be trusted. It is worthwhile noting here that to an objective observer, Netanyahu’s pronouncements would appear both shortsighted and ironic. The simplicity of his bellicose moral picture overlooked the nuances and developments in Iran’s political environment and post-revolutionary societal evolution. This was particularly true if one looked past the antics of Ahmadinejad and noted the change in Iranian politics after he left office. Moreover, it was difficult not to notice the irony associated with Netanyahu’s promoting the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism while playing to his religiously conservative base.

The American president and others were not impressed with Netanyahu’s rhetorical attempts to thread this needle. They were frustrated by Netanyahu’s vocal

⁶⁵² Pluralizing the religious honorific as stand-ins for Iran’s political leadership became a common rhetorical flourish among Iran’s opponents. Portraying Iran’s political leaders as a collective of religious fanatics implied that Islam motivated its murderous intent. Rather than acknowledging Ayatollah and Mullah as honorifics accorded by Islam, Israeli leaders, led by Netanyahu and facilitated by supportive media, employed these terms pejoratively.

Figure 4



Source: Jerusalem Post Archives (via Newsbank)

religious supporters, who opposed any peace negotiations that compromised Israel's biblically designated borders of Judea and Samaria.⁶⁵³ World leaders, too, appeared unimpressed by Netanyahu's daring them not to engage with Iran to seek a diplomatic solution to nuclear disarmament.

Israeli scholars and experts assisted Netanyahu's moral arguments for discrediting Iranian actions or statements. Those scholars preternaturally inclined to suspect Iran's intentions offered the concept of "*taqiya*" as the proof-text for distrusting Iranian motives behind seemingly conciliatory statements. They claimed that *taqiya* was a religiously-permitted lie if intended to deceive one's enemies.⁶⁵⁴ This gave credence to Netanyahu's claims that Iranian negotiators were likely to be deceitful and dishonest in their dealings with the heathens in the West.⁶⁵⁵ A close Netanyahu advisor, Dore Gold,⁶⁵⁶ in his book *The Risk of Nuclear Iran: How Tehran Defies the West*, the publication of which coincided with Netanyahu's return to office, argued that such dishonesty was a key feature of Iranian behavior. According to Gold, Ayatollah Khomeini

⁶⁵³ Judea and Samaria are the biblical names for the territory comprising the Kingdom of Israel. In the modern context, they refer to the occupied territory of the West Bank. Israeli hardliners and advocates for increased Jewish settlement in this area frequently use Judea and Samaria in place of the modern administrative names defined by the Oslo Accords (Areas A, B, and C).

⁶⁵⁴ According to *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, *taqiya* is defined as the "Precautionary denial of religious belief in the face of potential persecution. Stressed by Shiite Muslims, who have been subject to periodic persecution by the Sunni majority." John L. Esposito, 'Taqiyah', in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (Oxford University Press, 2003), <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195125580.001.0001/acref-9780195125580-e-2338>.

⁶⁵⁵ Harold Rhode, an American Middle East scholar, has claimed that *taqiya* is an important part of Iranian strategy. In an introduction to a strategic assessment of Iranian negotiating behavior, which he wrote for an Israeli Center, he argued that "The Western concept of demanding that a leader subscribe to a moral and ethical code does not resonate with Iranians." Harold Rhode, 'The Sources of Iranian Negotiating Behavior' (Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs), accessed 17 December 2015, http://www.jcpa.org/text/iranian_behavior.pdf.

⁶⁵⁶ Gold, a longtime friend and confidant of Netanyahu, served as an Israeli diplomat and think-tank director before being appointed Director General of Israel's Foreign Ministry.

had invoked *taqiya* to hide Iran's nuclear development program and its support for terrorist groups.⁶⁵⁷ Influential author Ronen Bergman, whose book *The Secret War with Iran* contributed to the Israeli public's understanding of the Iranian challenge, noted that *taqiya* was an important part of the Iranian psyche. Bergman explained that "This blatantly cunning style of leadership would have a significant impact on the conduct of government in Iran after [Khomeini's death], and on the conduct of Shiites all over the world."⁶⁵⁸

C. Invoking Populism

While Netanyahu had reason to believe that his morality-based threat narrative would resonate with religious Jews, he undoubtedly realized he needed a broader base to secure support for action against Iran. At home, he needed secular Israelis both to believe that Iran threatened Israel's existence and to agree that proposals seeking diplomatic solutions would not resolve the conflict. Resorting to populist strategies, Netanyahu manipulated the fractures in Israeli society to define an Israeli polity in which those rejecting his message would be excluded. His appeal was emotional rather than substantive. Israelis, and by extension all Jews, were bound by the Jewish imperative of solidarity when threatened with annihilation. According to the populist playbook, Netanyahu implied that Israelis should recognize that the shared threat trumped any disagreement between secular and religious political factions over other issues. At a minimum, they should not engage in active public disagreement with his Iran messaging.

Having only succeeded in forming a government with the support of the religious factions, Netanyahu could not compromise his fealty to this core base. That they had

⁶⁵⁷ Dore Gold, *The Rise of Nuclear Iran: How Tehran Defies the West*, 1 edition (Regnery Publishing, 2009), 293.

⁶⁵⁸ Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran*.

become a powerful constituency resulted from what Michael Walzer has called the “paradox of liberation.”⁶⁵⁹ Walzer observed that Israel’s founders, having eschewed religious orthodoxy and historic Jewish victimhood to create a modern state, had effectively instigated a backlash among the religious communities. They resented having been excluded from the vision of the new state,⁶⁶⁰ and they were now determined to reestablish their religious authority in the “Jewish State.” They had become numerically strong due to their high birthrates and the immigration of religious Zionists, as well as politically savvy. They developed messaging that secured the support of many non-orthodox Jews, who were offended by the idea that the founders had denied Jewish history and tradition. By forming active religious political parties and adopting modern political strategies, they made it increasingly difficult for the political elites to oppose their demands for a greater role in government.⁶⁶¹

As the religious parties enlarged the political space for their messages, they eventually proved astutely practical in accepting the personally secular, but politically ambitious, Netanyahu as their leader. With no strongly held domestic agenda of his own, Netanyahu was open to promoting policies embraced by Israel’s right-wing religionists. In securing his leadership, he received unintended help from the fractious political left, which had few appealing ideas for Israel’s future to counter the right’s

⁶⁵⁹ Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

⁶⁶⁰ Ironically, developments in Iran followed a somewhat similar historic arc. The Shah’s attempt to modernize his country included discounting the political power of Islam. This enabled a fundamentalist cleric to mobilize popular support and succeed in overthrowing the Shah’s regime. Not all supporters of the Islamic Revolution wanted a return to a theocratic society as much as they wanted an end to the increasingly dictatorial and terrorizing government of the Shah. Unlike Israel, the backlash in Iran occasioned a revolution, while in Israel the return of orthodoxy was evolutionary.

⁶⁶¹ Walzer notes that a commonality among states emerging from religious-based societies and embracing a secularized national liberation is that they were, like Israel, unable to sustain their secular vision for more than a couple of generations. Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation*, 29.

agenda. By yielding to the religionists' domestic policy demands and by offering foreign policies that they could enthusiastically embrace, Netanyahu could create the illusion, if not the reality, of a significantly large active polity that would ostracize or silence those inclined to criticize his Iran message.

Employing a strategy to capitalize on these developments enabled Netanyahu to use his co-religionists to invoke the concept of "Jewish Peoplehood," defined by its moral superiority and survival of historical existential challenges. Israelis questioning whether Iran posed such an existential threat risked being accused of not being "of the people." Non-Jewish opponents of Israel unwilling to acknowledge the Iran threat could be accused of anti-Semitism. No skeptic was immune. Foreign allies who questioned the veracity of and failed to respond to Israel's entreaties faced charges of enabling anti-Zionism. Netanyahu could not silence his foreign critics, but he could continually voice Israel's moral standing against inaction or compromise.

i. The Crisis: Israel in Iran's Crosshairs

According to Netanyahu, Israel faced an ongoing crisis in its clash with a normatively unbounded and unpredictable enemy regime that would soon possess a nuclear bomb. This was not an easy case to make to world leaders, since Iran had yet to produce the weapon or a delivery system capable of reaching Israel.⁶⁶² The risk

⁶⁶² The assumption was that Iran's nuclear program was being developed in conjunction with its ballistic missile program, such that when the country developed the bomb it would also possess the capacity to deliver it. Iran had been periodically testing missiles since the mid-1990s, although they achieved only limited success. Testing increased after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election in 2005, including the first successful test of the Shahab-3 missile, the first medium-range missile capable of reaching Israel. The medium-range missiles were the first class of weapons that U.S. intelligence assessments believed were "inherently capable" of carrying a nuclear payload, although there was no evidence to suggest that Iran was attempting to pair its missile development with its nuclear technology. UN Security Council Resolution 2231 in 2010 forbade Iran from developing and testing missiles that were "inherently capable of delivering nuclear weapons." It did not prevent them from developing missiles as part of

associated with factual claims is that they can be refuted. If proven wrong, Netanyahu risked undermining the credibility of his indeterminate claims, most especially those attributing genocidal intent to Iran's leaders. At home, however, producing fear did not require facts. Manipulating uncertainty could sustain the sense of crisis.

To stress the tangibility of the uncertainty, Netanyahu advanced Iran's sponsorship of terrorism. In effect, he pictured a crisis featuring Iran as a double-edged sword. One side was conceivable, while the other was familiar. He sought to convince Israelis that both were believable, but he hedged his bets by offering alternate bases for fear. Those skeptical about Iran's capacity to bomb Israel should still fear that Iran might do so in the not-too-distant future. At the same time, they should fear the possibility at any moment of an Iranian-sponsored terrorist attack. He conflated the two risks by claiming that Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon would likely embolden terrorists.⁶⁶³

That Iran intended to target Israel was the worst-case scenario, which he emphasized frequently. This formed an essential element of the crisis narrative. Representative of this trope was his 2009 speech to the gathering of Jewish Federations of North America. He stated that "The Iranian regime tyrannizes its people, sponsors and supplies terrorists, and openly pledges to wipe Israel off the map. Now just imagine

a conventional weapons program. Steven A Hildreth, 'Iran's Ballistic Missile and Space Launch Programs' (Congressional Research Service, 6 December 2012), 3.

⁶⁶³ Netanyahu frequently suggested that an Iranian bomb would embolden terrorists by providing them with nuclear protection against Israeli retaliation, or worse, might enable Iran directly to supply terrorist groups with nuclear weapons they could use against Israel. He suggested both possibilities in his May 2009 joint statement with President Barack Obama, explaining, "In this context, the worst danger we face is that Iran would develop nuclear military capabilities...if Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons, it could give a nuclear umbrella to terrorists, or worse, it could actually give terrorists nuclear weapons." Benjamin Netanyahu and Barack Obama, 'Meeting Between PM Netanyahu and U.S. President Barack Obama', 18 May 2009, Israeli Prime Minister's Office, <http://www.pmo.gov.il/english/mediacenter/speeches/pages/speechobama.aspx>.

how much more dangerous this regime would be if it had atomic bombs.”⁶⁶⁴ He would cite as proof text a 2001 quote from former President Hashemi Rafsanjani about the effects of a nuclear bomb on a small territory like Israel. Netanyahu reported that Rafsanjani had maintained that one bomb would completely destroy Israel, while a similar bomb could not annihilate the Muslim world even if it caused massive damage.⁶⁶⁵ Netanyahu’s frequent invocation of this trope with its support coming from Rafsanjani served two purposes. It reminded Israelis of their vulnerability, while it also obfuscated any difference between Iranian hardliners and more moderate voices. It ascribed the same voice to all present and future Iranian leaders. “It’s instructive,” Netanyahu said in his address at the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) meeting in 2010, “that the ingathering of Jews to Israel doesn’t deter them. In fact, it whets their appetite.”⁶⁶⁶ Netanyahu was effectively stoking the fire of crisis by enlisting the support of American Jews.

After three years of exchanging threats and counter-threats with Ahmadinejad’s Iran, in 2012 Netanyahu’s rhetoric expressed certitude regarding Iran’s intention to destroy Israel by any means necessary. Although he admitted on occasion that the destruction might not be wrought by a nuclear weapon, he also reaffirmed his conviction that that Iran intended to use its nuclear weapon on Israel. Thus, Netanyahu hinted that the only way to eliminate the Iran threat was through direct military action. In a May 2012 private talk, Netanyahu conceded that he would be willing for Israel to suffer collateral damage from Iranian retaliation if an attack by American forces could

⁶⁶⁴ Benjamin Netanyahu, ‘Prime Minister Netanyahu’s Speech at the Jewish Federations of North America General Assembly’, 9 November 2009, Israeli Prime Minister’s Office.

⁶⁶⁵ This quote, speculating about what a nuclear bomb might do to Israel, is detailed in Chapter Three.

⁶⁶⁶ Netanyahu, ‘Prime Minister Netanyahu’s Speech at the AIPAC Conference’.

guarantee an end to a nuclear weapons threat. He maintained that such an outcome was “preferable to an atom bomb over our head.”⁶⁶⁷

For his part, Ahmadinejad contributed to the resonance of Netanyahu’s rhetoric. In August 2012, he delivered a series of highly inflammatory speeches in the lead up to the annual celebration of Quds (Jerusalem) Day on August 17. To a gathering of ambassadors from Islamic countries, Ahmadinejad argued that the key to solving the Palestinian problem was the elimination of the Zionist regime. Invoking a variety of anti-Semitic tropes, he maintained that “a horrendous Zionist clan has been ruling the major world affairs” for 400 years. Echoing well-worn anti-Semitic rhetoric, he claimed that Zionists were “behind the scenes of the major power circles, in political, media, monetary, and banking organizations in the world.”⁶⁶⁸ According to the Anti-Defamation League the address was Ahmadinejad’s “most anti-Semitic assault to date.” This was remarkable given Ahmadinejad’s past conduct and the ADL’s careful monitoring of anti-Semitism. Two weeks later, on Quds Day, Ahmadinejad reiterated his calls for the destruction of the Jewish State by claiming it was time to “remove the cancerous tumor of Israel” from the region.⁶⁶⁹

⁶⁶⁷ Itamar Eichner, ‘PM: Israel Won’t Be Spared Even If US Attacks Iran’, *Ynet News*, 8 May 2012, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4264459,00.html>.

⁶⁶⁸ Asher Zeiger, ‘Ahmadinejad’s New Call for Israel’s Annihilation Is His Most Anti-Semitic Assault to Date, Says ADL’, *The Times of Israel*, 2 August 2012, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/adl-blasts-ahmadinejads-latest-call-for-israels-annihilation-as-ominous/>.

⁶⁶⁹ Since 2006, the Israeli Foreign Ministry has published monthly reports of statements made by Israeli leaders on Iran. In August 2012, it published its first roundup of Iranian officials’ statements containing threats of destruction or delegitimization of the State of Israel and anti-Semitic remarks. Ahmadinejad was the source of most quotes, but other hardline political figures, such as Ayatollah Khamenei and IRGC Brigadier Gen. Ali Hajizadeh made contributions. The quotes were mostly sourced from English language outlets of Iran state media. Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Recent Iranian Statements: Threats, Delegitimization of Israel and Antisemitism’, 19 August 2012, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/Iran/Pages/Iranian_statements_Aug_2012.aspx.

Israel accorded Ahmadinejad's remarks international attention by directing its Ambassador to the United Nations to demand that it take action regarding Iran's threat. The Israeli Ambassador opened his letter to the President of the UN Security Council by claiming that recent statements and actions by Iran's leaders "mark a new phase in its war against the State of Israel." The letter went on to highlight what it deemed to be Iranian-sponsored acts of terror in Bulgaria, Delhi, Georgia, Thailand, and Azerbaijan.⁶⁷⁰

Netanyahu responded personally a month later during his address to the United Nations General Assembly. Holding up a diagram of a cartoon bomb meant to symbolize Iran's progress toward building a weapon, he drew a red line on the diagram to illustrate the point at which Israel and the world would no longer be able to prevent Iran's production of the bomb. He repeated his claim that "Nothing could imperil our common future more than the arming of Iran with nuclear weapons," warning that the danger lay in Iran's providing such weapons to terrorists. "Imagine the world with a nuclear armed Al Qaeda," he added. This amounted to a rhetorical flourish as it elided over the traditional enmity between Shiite Iran and Sunni Al Qaeda.⁶⁷¹

In conflating terrorism and Iran's nuclear capability, Netanyahu emphasized the increasing vulnerability of all Israelis. As a sponsor of terrorism, a nuclear Iran could protect terrorists from Israeli retaliation. Israel would be unable to respond if doing so provoked a more dangerous Iranian response. Not only could a relatively small act lead

⁶⁷⁰ Ron Prossor, 'Israeli Letter to UN on Iranian Incitement', 27 August 2012, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Documents, http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/Iran/Pages/Israel_submits_letter_UN_Iranian_incitement_27-Aug-2012.aspx.

⁶⁷¹ Interestingly, Netanyahu chose to use Iran's enemy Al Qaeda rather than the terrorist organizations Hamas and Hezbollah to which it had known ties, perhaps believing that the global terrorist network would resonate more with his audience than more regionally-focused organizations. Netanyahu pressed his case for crisis by enlarging the sources of danger to include Muslims with nuclear weapons in the hands of the "world's most dangerous terrorist regime or the world's most dangerous terrorist organization." Benjamin Netanyahu, 'Speech to UNGA' (27 September 2012).

to a disastrous escalation of hostilities, but Israel's advanced missile defense systems would be less effective against a guerilla-style attack. The compromise of Israel's defenses added to the aura of crisis. By 2012, over half of Israelis believed that there was a real possibility of being harmed by an Iranian attack.⁶⁷²

In contrast to his imagery of danger and crisis, Netanyahu displayed a notable lack of interest in presenting a realistic picture of the nuclear threat. Thus, he never elaborated upon the consequences of using a nuclear weapon, which should have served as a deterrent to its use. He devoted little attention to the consequences of nuclear destruction, fallout, radioactive contamination, and regional collateral damage. He also failed to note that Iran, and not Israel, was a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Of course, he never admitted that of the two nations, only Israel actually had a nuclear weapon.

As previously discussed, Netanyahu's employment of his crisis trope did not abate with the election of the more moderate Hassan Rouhani to replace Ahmadinejad as Iran's president. Neither did Netanyahu not stop forecasting imminent doom when Iran entered into negotiations with world powers to restrict its nuclear development program. Counterintuitively, as Figure 5 shows, the prime minister's warnings about the dangers of Iran and its leadership increased on both fronts. In 2013 alone, Netanyahu addressed the Iran threat on forty separate occasions, more than double that of the previous year.⁶⁷³ They spiked again in 2015 (31 statements, 20 more than the year prior)

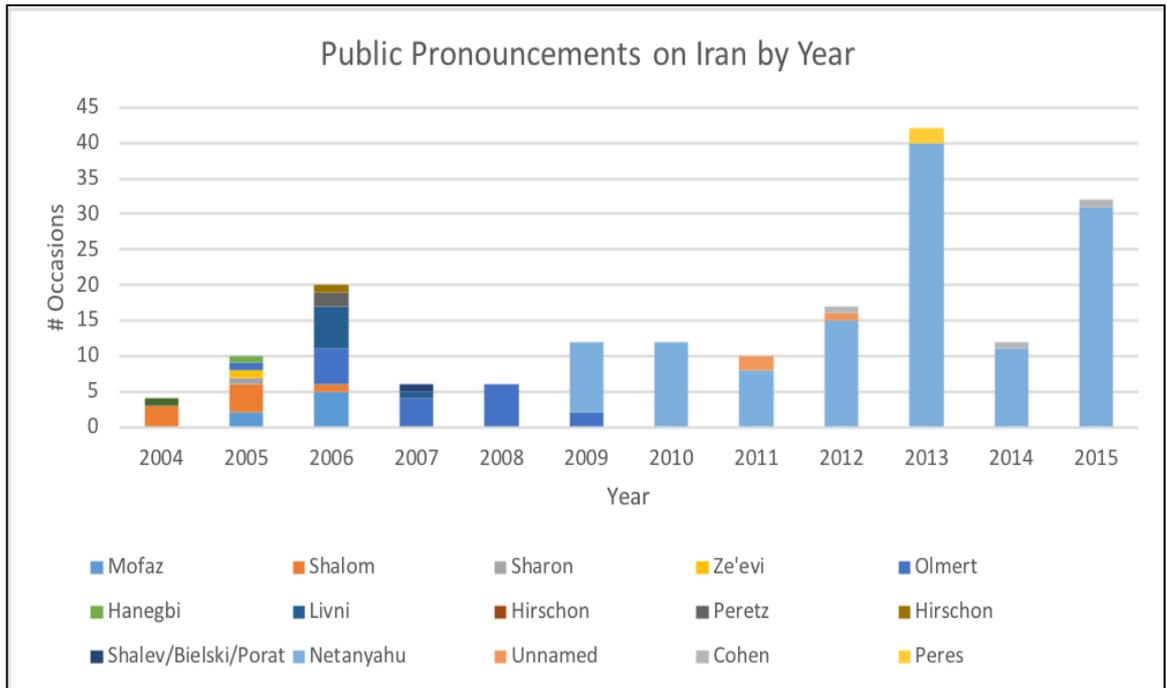
⁶⁷² Ephraim Yaar and Tamar Hermann, 'The Peace Index' (The Israel Democracy Institute, August 2012), [http://www.peaceindex.org/files/The%20Peace%20Index%20Data%20-%20August%202012\(1\).pdf](http://www.peaceindex.org/files/The%20Peace%20Index%20Data%20-%20August%202012(1).pdf).

⁶⁷³ Evidence of Netanyahu's fixation on the Iran threat lies in a comparison of the number of separate statements on Iran made during his administration with those of previous administrations. From 2006-2009, Netanyahu's predecessor, Ehud Olmert, mentioned Iran in public statements on 17 different occasions. Netanyahu, by contrast, did so 127 times between 2009 and 2015.

as negotiations concluded with an “Iran Deal,” strictly limiting Iran’s enrichment activities in exchange for sanctions relief. Additionally, the textual analysis of transcripts of Netanyahu’s speeches presented in Figure 6 shows how Iran gradually became a greater focus of his rhetoric amidst the global effort to engage diplomatically with Iran. Netanyahu’s speeches and public statements averaged more mentions of “Iran” during the Rouhani administration than during the confrontational years of Ahmadinejad’s presidency. The density plot of his Iran references in Figure 6 shows that Netanyahu increased his attacks on Iran as Iran’s diplomatic engagement with world powers drew closer to critical milestones on an agreement over the fate of Iran’s nuclear program.

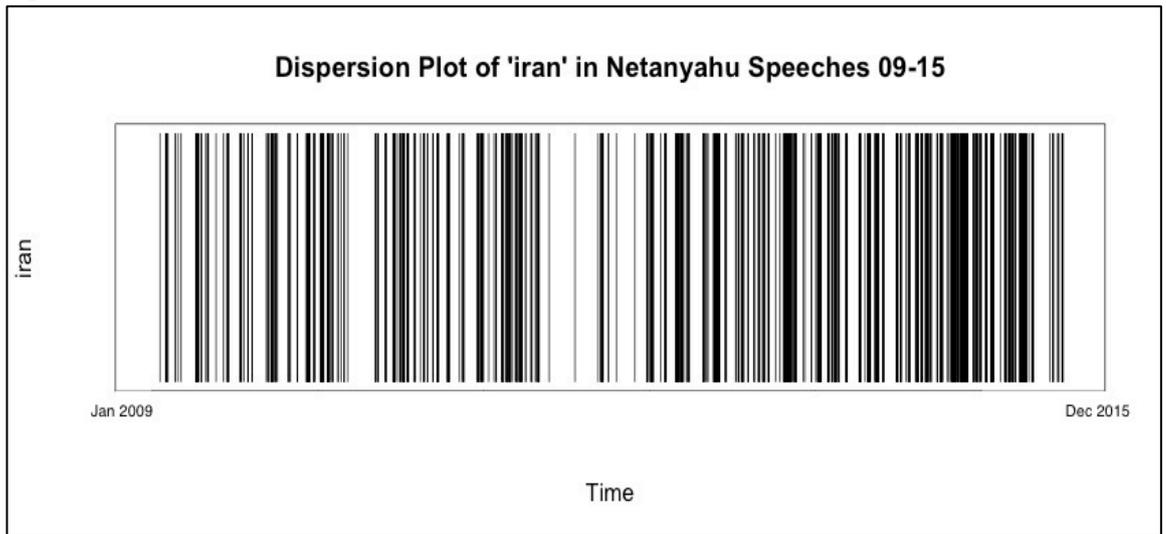
Netanyahu, using force of repetition and access to powerful media platforms, seized the opportunity to be heard as a dissenting voice through his messaging. As he increased his messaging on to foreign and domestic audiences, the Israeli Prime Minister assumed a new role: the leader of the global opposition to negotiations with Iran.

Figure 5



Source: Prime Minister's Office Archives

Figure 6



Source: Prime Minister's Office Archives

ii. Netanyahu's Claim to Leadership

Netanyahu's leadership trope did not differ appreciably from the messages about himself conveyed during his earlier service as Prime Minister. Nothing that happened in the interim caused him to believe he needed to change his image. Thus, he had no reason to modify what Eyal Arad, his former advisor, called "a messianic notion of himself."⁶⁷⁴ Rather, his self-perception confirmed his belief that he was the leader bold enough to confront Iran and condemn those who refused to do so. He was prepared to take whatever steps he deemed necessary.⁶⁷⁵

Netanyahu used a selective recounting of history as the justification for moving forward. The lessons he derived from the past required that the Jewish people not wait for their enemies to attack them before seizing the opportunity to act against would-be destroyers.⁶⁷⁶ As leader, Netanyahu saw his role as preventing another Holocaust. In his historical recounting, Iranian leaders were Adolph Hitler and his collaborators, and the nuclear development program represented the Nazi extermination enterprise. His mandate did not come only from twentieth century events but stretched back to the biblical account of the rescue of Jews from Persian annihilation. As discussed earlier, Netanyahu conveniently omitted from his retelling of the Hebrew Bible's Esther story

⁶⁷⁴ Sarah Moughty, 'Eyal Arad: A "Messianic" Netanyahu', 6 January 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/eyal-arad-a-messianic-netanyahu/>.

⁶⁷⁵ Arad went on to say that Netanyahu believed that Jews can "never trust the outside world to protect them, because it won't." Moughty.

⁶⁷⁶ In Netanyahu's version of events, world history is comprised of a long list of nations that have sought to persecute the Jewish people, ranging from the "bloodletting of the Middle Ages," to "the expulsion of the Jews from England, and then from Spain and then from Portugal," to "the wholesale slaughter of Jews in the Ukraine," and "the pogroms in Russia." Netanyahu, 'Prime Minister Netanyahu's Speech at the AIPAC Conference'.

the part where the Jewish Queen saves the Jews by prevailing upon the Persian King to counter the order he had been duped into issuing by his evil viceroy.⁶⁷⁷

In Netanyahu's telling, he is the inheritor of the biblical mission. Contrary to the text, he claims the tale testifies to the long-standing enmity of Jews and Persians, but that, like the heroic Esther, he will intervene to prevent harm to his people. In a remarkable speech to a Joint Session of Congress⁶⁷⁸ on the day before the 2015 Purim holiday, Netanyahu began his address by referring to the "powerful Persian viceroy named Haman, who plotted to destroy the Jewish people some 2,500 years ago."⁶⁷⁹ After addressing his topic of the "grave threats radical Islam and Iran pose to our security and way of life," he concluded by returning to the biblical narrative. He articulated his leadership mission: "Today the Jewish people face another attempt by

⁶⁷⁷ Netanyahu also omitted mention of the final chapter, in which the Jews, having been authorized by the King to kill those who might seek to harm them, slaughter thousands of people. The text does not specify whether the killing is conducted in self-defense or revenge. The story of Purim has always played an important role in Jewish history and provides a poignant example of the way in which collective memory can be manipulated for political purposes. (See discussion in Chapter 2 for more on the Purim story.) Peter Novick points out that during the medieval period, "these 'memories' provided gratifying revenge fantasies" to the Jews, but they have been excluded from more recent celebratory traditions. Some factions in Iran have sought to exploit this detail to cast the story as a tale of Jewish savagery; some even referring to it as an "Iranian holocaust." Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000); Estrin, 'Iranians and Israelis Are in a Battle over History — and the Holiday of Purim'; 'جشن «پوریم» تراژدی غمبار ایرانیان'.

⁶⁷⁸ The speech represented a violation of international protocol and the Prime Minister's insertion of himself into American politics. He had accepted the invitation of the Republican Speaker of the House without the consent of President Obama. Moreover, his remarks implicitly, but unmistakably, criticized the president's policy. The speech also came at a precarious moment: U.S. negotiators were nearing a deal with Iran on the fate of Iran's nuclear program, while Israel's elections, in which Netanyahu was seeking re-election, were less than two weeks away. That Netanyahu was campaigning by addressing the American Congress is further evidence that Israeli politicians and intellectuals often seek to influence opinion in Israel by promoting themselves and their ideas abroad.

⁶⁷⁹ Nicky Woolf Amanda Holpuch in Washington, 'John Boehner Invites Netanyahu to Address Congress on Iran next Month', *The Guardian*, 21 January 2015, sec. US news, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jan/21/boehner-netanyahu-invite-congress-iran-obama>.

yet another Persian potentate to destroy us. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei spews the oldest hatred, the oldest hatred [sic] of anti-Semitism with the newest technology."⁶⁸⁰ Even Russian President Putin rebuked him for this analogy.⁶⁸¹

As the Western powers approached reaching an agreement with Iran, Netanyahu's speech to the U.S. Congress represented a watershed moment in his savior trope. He essentially set forth three related goals of his leadership mission. First, he vowed to oppose a "bad" and "dangerous" diplomatic agreement to reduce the Iran nuclear threat. Second, he sought to prevent normalization of Iran in the international order. Finally, he promoted recognition that Iran's threat to Israel was larger than its nuclear program. Iran's support of terrorists targeting Israel represented an ongoing significant danger.

Netanyahu had long drawn on his morality trope to enhance his leadership status and highlight Israel's, if not the world's, need for a savior. Iran could not be trusted: its ideological destiny was to destroy Israel and no negotiation, engagement, or agreement with Iran would end its quest or remove the threat it posed. In 2012, Netanyahu had told the American Israel Public Affairs Committee conference that "As

⁶⁸⁰ In subsequent references, Netanyahu was even bolder in co-opting the story to further his policy agenda. For example, in 2017 he instructed a group of Israeli schoolchildren who were celebrating the Purim festival that the holiday symbolized the efforts of modern Iran to destroy the Israeli state. Benjamin Netanyahu, פורים שמח!, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/Netanyahu/videos/10154454625947076/>; Netanyahu, 'The Complete Transcript of Netanyahu's Address to Congress'.

⁶⁸¹ In 2017, Netanyahu received a rare rebuke for his invocation of the Esther story when he repeated his interpretation of the tale to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Putin publicly scolded the Israeli Prime Minister telling him to stop dwelling on the past and that "We now live in a different world. Let us talk about that now." In a surreal twist, the incident also elicited a response from Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, who took to Twitter to lecture Netanyahu on biblical scripture and to accuse Netanyahu of "selling bigoted lies against a nation which has saved the Jews." Karami, 'Zarif Gives Netanyahu Lesson in Jewish Scripture'.

Prime Minister of Israel, I will never let my people live in the shadow of annihilation.”⁶⁸²

He had reason to believe that this message resonated with Israelis. Similarly, two prominent Israeli journalists published a book purporting to examine a lengthy history of secret Israel-Iran proxy conflicts.⁶⁸³ A poll taken in 2012 showed that the Israeli public saw war as a real possibility.⁶⁸⁴ A majority of Israelis (56%) even expressed skepticism about the sincerity of Western diplomatic efforts to stop Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.⁶⁸⁵ Israelis still embraced Netanyahu as their leader three years later when they reelected him as prime minister two weeks after his address to the U.S. Congress.⁶⁸⁶

At the time of Netanyahu’s re-election, Ahmadinejad had been out of the picture for nearly two years. Yet Netanyahu continued to position himself as the most knowledgeable prophet of doom. Intelligence leaks have revealed Netanyahu’s

⁶⁸² Benjamin Netanyahu, ‘PM Netanyahu’s Speech at AIPAC Policy Conference 2012’ (5 March 2012), <http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Speeches/Pages/speechAIPAC060312.aspx>.

⁶⁸³ The book, *Israel vs. Iran: The Shadow War* by Yaakov Katz and Yoaz Hendel, exemplified the national zeitgeist. It included fantastical passages imagining Iranian nuclear strikes against Israel and preemptive Israeli military missions against Iran. Years later Katz explained that his inspiration for writing the book came from observing that “Israeli panic” over Iran’s nuclear program was at its highest point and thus, by implication, there would be great public interest in reporting and speculation about these topics. Interview with Yaakov Katz.

⁶⁸⁴ Yaar and Hermann, ‘The Peace Index’, August 2012.

⁶⁸⁵ Ephraim Yaar and Tamar Hermann, ‘The Peace Index’ (The Israel Democracy Institute, February 2012), <http://www.peaceindex.org/files/The%20Peace%20Index%20Data%20-%20February%202012.pdf>.

⁶⁸⁶ Citing disagreements within his coalition partner Yisrael Beiteinu, Netanyahu called for early elections to be held in January 2015. Netanyahu’s Likud won with a plurality of the vote (23.4%), picking up 30 seats. He defeated the combined Labor/Hatunah “Zionist Union” party, which came in second. Netanyahu joined with Naftali Bennett’s Jewish Home, United Torah Judaism, Kulanu, and Hatunah to form a governing coalition with the bare minimum of 61 seats. In the wake of the election, several commentaries described Netanyahu’s new government as the “most right-wing” in the country’s history. Mairav Zonszein, ‘Benjamin Netanyahu Just Formed the Most Right-Wing Government in Israeli History’, *The Nation*, 25 May 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/benjamin-netanyahu-just-formed-the-most-right-wing-government-in-israeli-history/>.

willingness to overstate the danger facing Israel. Documents reveal that Netanyahu accelerated the timetable by which Iran was likely to produce a nuclear weapon at the same time he was informed that Israeli intelligence did not believe Iran was working on producing weapons. The “Mossad spy cables” covered the period from 2006 through 2014, which included five years of Netanyahu’s second term as prime minister.⁶⁸⁷ Similarly, Netanyahu’s advocacy of military intervention contradicted the advice of his generals. They voiced concern that starting a regional war with Iran could prove detrimental to Israel. In continually pressing his case, Netanyahu ignored the many elite voices who had publicly acknowledged the futility of stopping Iran by a conventional military response.⁶⁸⁸ At the same time, top military officials privately delivered similar messages.⁶⁸⁹ It is hard to know whether Netanyahu so strongly believed that the justness of his cause was worth the risk of failure or whether he was engaging in strategic posturing. In either case, he used the push for action as an element of his leadership trope.

Cabinet meeting minutes reveal Netanyahu’s unwillingness to accept that any negotiated agreement with Iran would reduce the existential threat to Israel. Rather, he claimed that the result would “enable Iran to arm itself with nuclear weapons.”⁶⁹⁰ In a

⁶⁸⁷ ‘The Spy Cables: A Glimpse into the World of Espionage’, Al Jazeera, 23 February 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/02/spy-cables-world-espionage-snowden-guardian-mi6-cia-ssa-mossad-iran-southafrica-leak-150218100147229.html>.

⁶⁸⁸ In what was perhaps the biggest defection from Netanyahu’s position on Israel, former Mossad chief Meir Dagan said publicly in 2011 that an Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities would be a “stupid idea.” Isabel Kershner, ‘Ex-Mossad Chief Warns Against Strike on Iran’, *The New York Times*, 8 May 2011, sec. Middle East, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/09/world/middleeast/09israel.html>.

⁶⁸⁹ Lucas reports that Defense Minister Barak and several top military officials told Netanyahu that they believed a military engagement would result in an unsatisfactory outcome similar to the 2006 war with Hezbollah in Lebanon. Scott Lucas, ‘How Israel’s Military Stopped Netanyahu Attacking Iran’, *The Conversation*, 26 February 2015, <http://theconversation.com/how-israels-military-stopped-netanyahu-attacking-iran-38009>.

⁶⁹⁰ ‘Cabinet Meeting Minutes’, 18 February 2015, Israeli Prime Minister’s Office.

display of what Richard Hofstadter called the “fundamentalist mind,”⁶⁹¹ Netanyahu demonstrated his unwillingness to adapt his view to changing circumstances. Thus, he blurred the line between nuclear technology and weaponry. Even if Iran was not actively engaged in producing a bomb, he argued, it would still remain a “nuclear threshold state.”⁶⁹² He maintained that there was no functional difference between Iran’s nuclear energy program and the acquired technological knowledge on how to produce a nuclear weapon. Therefore, there was no solution to the Iran threat short of regime change.

With this argument, his populist strategy had effectively securitized Iran as an unresolvable existential threat to Israel.

VI. Conclusion

Netanyahu’s political acumen enabled him to construct a narrative positioning Israel as the victim of an existential threat and himself as the leader determined to save Israelis from its actualization. Choosing his narrative content carefully, he ensured that it could withstand most unforeseen developments in world events without material change. This allowed him to repeat his populist tropes by which he recruited and maintained public support for his message and for the messenger. By manipulating the concepts of uncertainty and Israeli identity, he made it difficult for opponents to critique his narrative. Israelis, he insisted, had compelling reasons to fear what Iran could do, and those voicing skepticism risked undermining Israel’s security. Israeli critics forfeited

⁶⁹¹ The “fundamentalist mind,” according to Hofstadter, is “essentially Manichean; it looks upon the world as an arena for conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, and accordingly it scorns compromises (who would compromise with Satan?) and can tolerate no ambiguities. It cannot find serious importance in what it believes to be trifling degrees of difference...the secularized fundamentalist mind begins with a definition of what is right, and looks upon politics as an arena in which that right must be realized.” Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, 135.

⁶⁹² ‘Cabinet Meeting Minutes’, 25 January 2015, Israeli Prime Minister’s Office.

their identity as members of the Jewish peoplehood, while foreigners were either anti-Semites or anti-Zionists, or both, or enablers of Israel's opponents.

Invoking Holocaust imagery and the selective recounting of history, Netanyahu emphasized the consequences of the threat in a manner designed to secure support for his proposed responses. Although the strategic use of the Nazi's extermination of six million Jews did not originate with Netanyahu, he was expert in capitalizing on the Holocaust denial of Iran's president in a manner designed to resonate with Israelis and world Jewry. As Peter Novick points out, the Holocaust and historical memory makes Israel "a country whose population...has a special relationship to the victims of the crime."⁶⁹³ In Netanyahu's narrative, Iran was the criminal regime embracing a murderous intent to annihilate Jewish victims.

Even as the Iran narrative changed for most of the world with consequential developments – which included the election of a new Iranian president; the publication of intelligence reports indicating that Iran was not engaged in weapons development; and the engagement of Western nations with Iran to suspend its enrichment of uranium, which effectively deprived it of bomb making capacity – Netanyahu did not modify the core of his threat narrative. Instead, he redefined his leadership mission to become the principal opponent of an agreement and to remind Israelis and the world of Iran's continuing danger. Israelis reelected him as their leader, exemplifying the political power of populism and the policy consequences of securitization.

⁶⁹³ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*.

Conclusion and Epilogue

I. Back to the Beginning: A Predicate for a Narrative

In 1961, a young Israeli diplomat arrived in Tehran on his first overseas posting. Unlike his colleagues at the diplomatic mission in Tehran, Zvi Rafiah's portfolio did not include collaboration with military officers or high government officials in the Shah's court. Instead, Rafiah aimed to engage with Iran's vibrant cultural scene. His responsibilities included arranging intellectual and cultural exchanges, including providing Iranians with all-expense paid trips to Israel as part of Israeli "Hasbara," or public promotional campaigns.

In February 1963, a famous Iranian writer and scholar named Jalal Al-e Ahmad embarked on one of those trips. His presence on such an obviously promotional endeavor was odd considering that he was among the most vocal intellectual opponents of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's regime. At the time of the trip, Iran and Israel were still partners in the Periphery Alliance, which included intelligence sharing, military cooperation, and other exchanges. The previous year, Al-e Ahmad had published *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxification), a harsh critique of the Shah's regime that decried the monarch's efforts to initiate Western style reforms across Iran. This earned him favor with some of Iran's most prominent anti-Shah clerical elite, including Ayatollahs Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei, both of whom were vocal critics of the Shah and the Jewish State.⁶⁹⁴

⁶⁹⁴ Al-e Ahmad's work denouncing Western cultural influence in Iran would play an important role a decade and a half later during the Islamic Revolution led by Khomeini, providing part of the ideological foundation for the Shah's overthrow.

While not devoutly religious himself, Al-e Ahmad used the language and philosophy of Shiite Islam in his literary works to describe Iranian culture.⁶⁹⁵ Thus, while on his trip, Al-e Ahmad analyzed his surroundings through a uniquely religious lens, publishing his observations after his trip. He began his account in *Journey to the Land of Israel* by describing Israel as a “*velayat*,” a term typically associated with Shiite jurisprudence involving the concept of guardianship. In the political context, it refers to the idea that the authority of national government comes from more than the people within its borders; a higher power must also bestow legitimacy on the leadership.⁶⁹⁶ Al-e Ahmad saw Israel as not just a country for the two million inhabitants of a small strip of desert land, but as a symbol of global Jewry. Much like Israel’s founders, he called the establishment of the state “a true miracle.” Ironically, he saw the country’s leaders as modern-day prophets, writing that “Ben-Gurion [sic] is no less than Enoch, and Moshe Dayan no less than Joab.” Invoking *velayat* he continued, “These guardians, each one with his own prophecies or – at least – clear-vision, built a guardianship state in the land of Palestine and called to it all the Children of Israel.”⁶⁹⁷ Thus, Al-e Ahmad concluded, “Like it or not, [the State of Israel] now governs and acts in the name of all twelve million Jews scattered around the world.”⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁹⁵ Al-e Ahmad professed a fascination with the founding of the Jewish state, in particular its socialist roots and religious ethos.

⁶⁹⁶ Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini would later espouse his political vision of *Velayat e-Faqih*, or “Guardianship of the Jurist,” in a book published in 1970. Based on a series of lectures delivered while in exile in Iraq, Khomeini posited that clerics should serve as leaders of the Islamic community in a governmental capacity. This interpretation provided the doctrinal basis for Khomeini’s Islamic Revolution, although it is unclear the extent to which Al-e Ahmad was aware of this interpretation at the time of his writing on Israel. Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist*, 1970.

⁶⁹⁷ Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *The Israeli Republic: An Iranian Revolutionary’s Journey to the Jewish State*, trans. Samuel Thrope, Translation edition (Brooklyn, NY: Restless Books, 2017).

⁶⁹⁸ In support of this proposition he cited the trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann. Israeli courts convicted Eichmann of mass murder of Jews during the Holocaust. His execution was the only case of capital punishment in Israel. Al-e Ahmad believed that

Significantly, this respected Iranian intellectual, who would have an influential role in the Islamic Revolution sixteen years after his visit, conveyed to his readers an understanding and appreciation of the role of Israel not just as a nation-state but as a homeland for the Jewish people. At the same time, he noted two important criticisms of its leaders' policies. The first concerned the invocation of the Holocaust as justification for the treatment of Muslims; the second questioned the promotion of fear among its Jewish citizens.

Al-e Ahmad criticized the West for making Easterners pay for the creation of Israel in compensation for the Holocaust, which he viewed as a sin generated by the West. He wrote that it was unfair and questioned the reasoning behind why the Muslim world had to surrender its territory to the Jews for crimes committed by foreign peoples on another continent. This was a concern shared by many of Israel's regional opponents.

Al-e Ahmad also noticed a pervasive sense of insecurity among Israelis. During a visit to a kibbutz, a type of socialist farming collective, in northern Israel near the Syrian and Lebanese borders,⁶⁹⁹ a military commander lectured the group on weaponry and took them on a tour of the underground bunkers dug in preparation for war with the Arabs. In response to Al-e Ahmad's inquiry about fear as a motivational tool, a local school teacher explained that displays of power and war preparations were necessary "as long as we are under siege by the Arabs." Al-e Ahmad reported encountering this common refrain throughout the country, and he voiced skepticism. He noted that he warned the teacher, "You yourselves are constantly playing with fire. When you frighten

this event demonstrated that Israel's leaders were acting in the name of guardianship of Judaism rather than simply the state itself. He argued that by mounting a massive operation to kidnap Eichmann for trial in Israel, the country's leaders engaged in "something loftier than human rights declarations."

⁶⁹⁹ They visited kibbutz Ayelet HaShahar situated adjacent to the border with the Syrian-controlled Golan Heights. Israel later captured that territory in the 1967 War, four years after Al-e Ahmad's visit.

their side, you yourselves have to become frightened as well. And in place of eliminating your class differences, you spend your resources building shelters.”⁷⁰⁰

As an astute political observer, Al-e Ahmad’s account captured both the tension between and co-existence of the admirer and the critic of the Jewish State. Ironically, as an Iranian, he was far more critical of the leader of his own country than he was of policies of Israel’s leaders. From Al-e Ahmad’s perspective, Israel provided a model for a religious republic, a successful combination of socialist principles with religious ideals.

One suspects that, as he recorded his observations, he considered what lessons Israel held for a future Islamic state.⁷⁰¹ Most importantly, Al-e Ahmad’s observations encapsulated the history of the relations of the two countries, illuminating the complexities emerging from a history of uneasy friendship and political conflicts arising in a region undergoing significant change. He thus provides us with a testament to a narrative that might have been; one that challenges the idea that Israel’s present view of Iran, born of the populist securitization examined in this study, was inevitable.⁷⁰²

II. Fast-Forward 1992-2015: Project Conclusion

Admittedly, we can only speculate what Al-e Ahmad would have thought had he returned to Israel in 2015 after witnessing the development of the Israel-Iran enmity examined in this project. He almost certainly would have been both surprised and disappointed by the changes in the characteristics he had admired in the nascent state of his first visit, as well as its failure to alter some of the practices that he believed would

⁷⁰⁰ Al-e Ahmad, *The Israeli Republic*.

⁷⁰¹ Al-e Ahmad would not live to see his vision for Iran become a reality. He died in 1969.

⁷⁰² I am not suggesting that events should not have produced some degree of enmity between the nations. There were many bases for the nations to distrust and suspect each other’s intentions. Al-e Ahmad later denounced Israel’s preemptive action in the 1967 Six Day War by comparing Israeli aggression to Nazism. Ironically, Netanyahu often invoked a Nazi comparison in his threat narrative tropes.

one day prove damaging. Would he understand how and why Israelis had come to view Iran as an existential threat?

Given the post-revolutionary developments in his own country, he probably would not have been surprised by Israel's divergence from its founders' ideological roots, which Al-e Ahmad had admired and respected. Israel's not-so-secret alliance with the Shah, including its training of his repressive SAVAK secret police, earned it disdain from the Iranian public. At the same time, Ayatollah Khomeini's embrace of the Palestinian cause in the early days of the Islamic Revolution coupled with his fierce condemnations of Israeli and American aggression provided cause for alarm in Israel. The transitional period in Iran infused uncertainty into the relationship, breeding confusion among Israeli elites who were aware of the divergence between public posturing and private transactions. During the long and bloody war between Iran and Iraq, the hidden reality saw Israel selling arms to Iran in exchange for Iran providing oil to Israel. Some Israelis at least hoped that despite the rhetorical attacks, some restraint, if not mutually beneficial arrangement, would be possible. Others, however, introduced warnings of significant dangers ahead, foreshadowing concerns that would eventually come to dominate the Israeli foreign policy discourse. These concerns would furnish the seeds for implantation into Israeli political discourse of an existential threat narrative. Over the years, leaders would succeed in first securitizing Iran and later elevating it to the top of Israel's foreign policy and international agenda.

Although securitization meant that the Israeli public internalized the message of Iran as a mortal foe, there were remarkable similarities in the domestic political situations of the two countries. The State of Israel and the Islamic Republic each faced a foundational rift that generally defined their society and politics. Both had been riven by tensions between orthodox religious elements wielding political power and those who

consigned religion largely to the cultural and social spheres. While Iran's government was more theocratic and Israel's more democratic, each struggled with internal dissension over how to strike a balance between the religious and political elements within their respective systems. Competing factions alternatively colluded with or fought one another in a struggle for control over policy and positions of power.

For both nations, international politics provided the contestation for religious parties to test citizen identity and loyalty. If Al-e Ahmad had looked back in 2015 to consider the origins of the Israel-Iran conflict, he would have discerned that religiously and culturally-motivated conservatives exerted their strongest political influence by advocating a foreign policy agenda grounded in fear of the "other." Unlike in Iran, however, where the Revolutionary Guard Corps sought to expand Iranian influence in the region through military means, Israel turned inward by focusing on the threat to its continued well-being and, eventually, its existence. Particularly after Iraq's defeat in the Second Gulf War and the diminishment of the threat to Iran posed by Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime, Israelis' fear of Iran intensified. Israeli politicians were unwilling to modify their narrative even as Iranian interests converged with the West, and, by extension, with Israel, over the rise of Sunni extremism. Instead, Israeli politicians offered new reasons to fear Iran's intentions.

The Islamic Republic's resurrection of the Shah's nuclear program provided Israeli leaders the foundational material for constructing the Iran threat as existential. From a theoretical perspective, it added a new dynamic to regional and international relations, which could not be explained simply by realist theory grounded in power relations. Regardless of the facts regarding Iran's actual nuclear capabilities, Israeli leaders used the perception of Iranian malfeasance as a building block for a new threat calculus, thereby initiating a process to promote the acceptance and internalization of

this narrative by the Israeli public. The securitization of the Iranian threat required more than a powerful actor casting the collective as the putative victim. Iran certainly saw scientific expertise and nuclear development as part of its modernization effort and symbolic of its position as a regional power. Yet Iran, and not Israel, was a signatory to the NPT, and only Israel possessed “secret” nuclear weapons. Particularly as Iran’s nuclear program came under increased public scrutiny, intelligence agencies struggled to find data supporting the claim that Iran was building a military nuclear capability. An astute observer such as Al-e Ahmad, who knew Ayatollah Khomeini, would understand that the Supreme Leader had reluctantly agreed to restart the program after Iran’s experience as a victim of Iraqi chemical attacks during the 1980s. Thus, given Iran’s eventual willingness to negotiate a suspension of its nuclear development program, a knowledgeable analyst might wonder why Israelis in 2015 still refused to believe reports that Iran in 2003 had abandoned plans to use the program for military purposes.

As a man of letters, Al-e Ahmad would have undoubtedly understood the power of narrative to create a perceived threat that may diverge from the facts. During his earlier visit, he had observed that given Israel’s location as a Jewish state surrounded by hostile Arab neighbors, security issues necessarily occupied a prominent place on Israel’s political agenda. Having developed a democracy beset by an overabundance of political parties and a surfeit of political and military elites, Israeli public discourse featured a competition among leaders who exploited citizens’ sense of insecurity. Each would-be actor offered promises and proposals for keeping the public safe from exogenous threats. Israel’s right-wing hawks, the securitization actors, manipulated the threat characteristics of obviousness, imminence, and harm capability not only to identify a distinctive and catastrophic danger, but also to justify proposals for extraordinary

actions to reduce the risk. The promotion of military action was a distinctive message that further intensified the sense of insecurity.

From the vantage point of the second decade of the twenty-first century, Al-e Ahmad could look back and discern how events in Iran contributed to the narrative arc while Israel's changing political landscape catalyzed Iran as the priority foreign policy challenge. Iran's election in 2005 of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as its president provided Israel's leaders with the perfect avatar for the Iran they claimed to be confronting. As an avid Holocaust denier, with a bombastic style and messianic proclamations, he directed outrageous threats at Israel and its principal ally, the United States. Although not a cleric, Ahmadinejad still served to personify the threat of a dangerously unhinged Islamic regime. Coincidentally, just over a year following Ahmadinejad's ascension, Israel's supposedly indomitable army ineptly invaded Lebanon and suffered the humiliation of a stalemate in its effort to eliminate the terrorist threat of Hezbollah. Israeli leaders cleverly tempered the humiliation by blaming Iran, Hezbollah's strategic advisor and sponsor, as the reason for the calamity. The antics of Ahmadinejad contributed to the believability of the new narrative twist, conveniently tying words to deeds at a moment when the Israeli public was demanding answers.

Israel's failure in Lebanon spawned a reimagining of the Iran threat as a matter of urgent public concern. It concretized for the public the danger posed by Iran, conveniently tying words to deeds at a moment of national vulnerability. An Iran led by an unhinged Holocaust denier that controlled a major military force situated along Israel's northern border was an issue that required a reckoning. If Al-e Ahmad had listened carefully to Israelis' recounting of the history of the Ahmadinejad years and the Second Lebanon War post mortems, he would have heard echoes of the fears exhibited by Israelis during his first visit and been reminded of his concern that Israelis' continuous

preparations for war would become a self-propelling prophecy. The focus on Iran, the debacle in Lebanon, and the antics of Ahmadinejad not only fueled the fear narrative, but also held the potential to provoke an action, such as preemptive measures against the perceived threat of Iranian-led destruction. As the narrative embraced an action component, so too did it target a larger international audience. Thus, Israel sought to enlist the world in sharing its Iran threat narrative. Ironically, notwithstanding Israel's well-equipped and technologically savvy army, with its not-so-secret nuclear arsenal, and its repression of the Palestinians, which earned it international condemnation, Israel used the threat narrative to position itself as the victim.

The securitization of Iran as an existential enemy facilitated Benjamin Netanyahu's return to power. His defiant security rhetoric vis-à-vis Iran resonated with an increasingly strong religiously nationalist political base not only because of a fear of Iran, but also because it diverted attention and resources from addressing a territorial compromise with the Palestinians. From the perspective of a theorist, Netanyahu applied a strategic populist filter to the lens of securitization to further both his campaign against Iran and to bolster his leadership of that campaign. To do so, he engrafted three populist-themed messages onto his securitization speech act. First, he ascribed unverifiable motives to Iranian leaders, thereby transforming the conflict from a battle of strategic interests into a primarily moral pursuit. Netanyahu's vision was that of a Manichean struggle between the forces of evil, embodied by Iran, who were the inheritors of the Nazi pursuit of Jewish annihilation, and the forces of good, represented by Israel's ongoing struggle to survive and thrive in a hostile region. Netanyahu's posture aligned with the theology of his religious and nationalist followers, who believed that the Jews were, in fact, "The Chosen People." Second, Netanyahu understood that his base was invested in ensuring Iran remained the priority of Israel's foreign policy agenda

regardless of the nature of the actual threat. Collectively, they viewed an Israeli muscular response as a moral imperative. As a skilled orator, Netanyahu invoked populist rhetoric to affirm for his followers that they were the “true” Israelis, entitled to ostracize and ridicule the skeptics and “experts” who questioned the factual basis of the narrative. As Iran strengthened its regional influence, Netanyahu stoked the fire by presenting the issue as an ongoing crisis both to rally his base and to denigrate his political enemies. He crafted an image of strength and leadership against an implacable foe without ever having to deliver substantive results that would have diminished the threat posed by Iran.

Finally, after securing Iran as an indispensable part of Israeli political discourse and solidifying his strategic populism, Netanyahu maneuvered to challenge the norms of government conduct both at home and in the international arena. Domestically, he used his morally grounded messages to mute the fact-based challenges of skeptics seeking to debate his policies. Internationally, Netanyahu worked to enlist Western nations as allies in opposing pursuit of a diplomatic solution. He maintained that negotiation was impossible since the enemy would not engage in good faith. This, in turn, strengthened his position at home as a courageous leader among misguided or hostile, or perhaps even anti-Semitic, world leaders.

Viewing Netanyahu’s populist appeals, Al-e Ahmad would have been especially disappointed, although perhaps not surprised, that the Israeli leader used this tactic to obscure the humanity of his adversaries, the Palestinians as well as the Iranians. In his travelogue, Al-e Ahmad had voiced a commonly held Arab critique of using the Holocaust to justify creation of a Jewish homeland in the Middle East when it had been Europeans who had perpetrated the extermination campaign. Over its 70 years of existence, Israel not only achieved entrenchment, but with the “help” of its enemies’

belligerence in both word and deed, including commission of horrific acts of terrorism against civilians in Israel and world-wide, also succeeded in largely obscuring the debate over the justness of Israel's location. Yet here was Netanyahu boasting to his base of his defiant refusal to address the Palestinian demand for a state, while simultaneously invoking the Iran threat on the world stage to justify Israel's intransigence in seeking a diplomatic solution. Like the Iranians, the Palestinians could neither be trusted nor admitted to the community of nations. Eliding over the differences in the two pressing foreign policy concerns, Netanyahu challenged world leaders to either stand with Israel or align itself with evil.

By 2015, Netanyahu's unique brand of populism had largely united the Israeli polity against a shared exogenous enemy and positioned him as the country's savior. Unlike the growing populist movements in countries around the globe, however, Netanyahu did not ground his claim to leadership in ardent domestic nationalism. Rather, he chose to harness a collective fear to emphasize an Israeli foreign policy agenda that defied the expectations of his allies as well as enemies. He broadened his message beyond Israel's borders, directing his message at world Jewry and other supporters of Israel, whatever their motives. At home, he energized his right-wing base with his rhetorical skills and media support; no politician wanted to risk accusations of failing to prevent – or worse, enabling – the annihilation of Israel. On the world stage, Netanyahu vigorously opposed an international "deal" under which Iran would suspend its nuclear program in exchange for an end to its international isolation. Positioning himself as the prophetic lone voice of reason, he continued to speak of military intervention and regime change.

As of 2015, Netanyahu presented a paradox. He had failed to block progress toward a negotiated agreement over the fate of Iran's nuclear program and had become

estranged from many world leaders. At the same time, his willingness to challenge the world powers' diplomatic overtures to Iran promoted his standing at home and reinforced his image as the only leader capable of saving Israel from a nefarious Iran and a credulous West. Yet as he pressed for regime change in Iran, his certitude masked the possibility that the doctrine of unintended consequences could produce a worse result. Reportedly, his inability to secure support of the United States caused him to order a last-minute cancellation of a planned attack.

Thus, if in 2015 Al-e Ahmad departed from a second visit to Israel, he would have been hard-pressed to speculate regarding Netanyahu's proverbial "endgame."

Netanyahu's opposition to the Iran Deal was a risky strategy. If the Prime Minister believed his own narrative, a possible outcome would be Iran's continuation of its nuclear enrichment program, and, in the worst-case scenario, the successful completion of a military component. His message to world leaders, therefore, was counterintuitive: Israel would be less safe if Iran agreed to suspend its program, allowed international monitoring, and accepted strict limits on future development capabilities. According to this logic, notwithstanding inspections and sanctions, Iran would cheat while it would also acquire significant funds from its unfrozen assets to support its terrorist proxies and its regional hegemonic ambitions.⁷⁰³

⁷⁰³ It's worth noting that while Iran provides considerable funding and material support to groups engaged in terrorist activities, its level of strategic control is debatable. Most scholars agree that Iran exerts considerable influence over Hezbollah in Lebanon, but they are less certain of Iran's impact on Hamas in Palestine or the Houthis in Yemen. Karim Sadjadpour, *Iran Supports Hamas, but Hamas Is No Iranian 'Puppet'*, interview by Bernard Gwertzman, 7 January 2009, Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/interview/iran-supports-hamas-hamas-no-iranian-puppet>; 'Why Yemen's Political Implosion Is Dangerous for the U.S.', *PBS NewsHour* (PBS, 22 January 2015), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/yemens-political-implosion-dangerous-u-s>.

But Netanyahu's securitization process and strategic populism rely neither on logic nor on factual accuracy. If Iran remained isolated by the world community, it could threaten to acquire a bomb, which would continue the crisis, even if, due to sanctions, it might lack the resources to do so. It could withdraw from the NPT, but this would only serve to confirm Netanyahu warnings. This process of Iranian isolation via populist securitization could facilitate regime change since Iran's moderate government, having failed to improve its citizens' lives through engagement, would lose credibility. That this might result in a resurgence of hardliners would at least push the world to action as envisioned by Netanyahu. These developments would validate both Netanyahu's leadership and his Iran threat narrative. As an astute observer, Al-e Ahmad might have recognized that Netanyahu's populism conflated his message of existential danger with his status as the messenger and would-be savior of both Israel and the Jewish people. As an analyst of contemporary events, Al-e Ahmad would have realized that Netanyahu's message was more consequential for Israeli politics and society than it was for Iran's conduct. As a scholar, Al-e Ahmad might have agreed that Netanyahu was operating within a conceptual framework of populist securitization.

III. Epilogue and Questions for the Future

In 2015, Benjamin Netanyahu won a fourth term, his third consecutive, as prime minister by a surprisingly large margin. With polls showing him behind in the last weeks of the campaign, he engaged in an offensive that included a pledge not to allow the establishment of a Palestinian state during his remaining service as prime minister. Given that he also did not abandon the Iran threat narrative, he effectively promised Israelis a continuation of their state of insecurity as he offered himself as their confrontational leader.

What might have been a successful political strategy was, from a geopolitical perspective, a questionable, even risky, posture for Israel and, perhaps, the Middle East. Through his bellicose attacks on Israel's allies for engaging in negotiations with Iran over suspension of its nuclear enrichment program, he had isolated himself. He was also courting relationships with Iran's enemies, notably Saudi Arabia, based upon shared opposition to normalizing Iran's participation in the international arena.

Just months after Netanyahu's 2015 re-election, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, the United States, Russia, China, Great Britain, and France, together with Germany and the European Union, agreed to terms on the JCPOA.⁷⁰⁴ Netanyahu had vigorously opposed the negotiations, and he was no happier about the final agreement. To be sure, the agreement was a compromise, one in which Iran would agree to accept severe restrictions on its nuclear program to prevent it from building a bomb, but not end its nuclear program entirely.⁷⁰⁵ There were reasons to continue criticizing Iran's conduct, not the least of which was its support for militant groups targeting Israel, and to express disappointment that the agreement was not more comprehensive. Still, there was very little space for opposition if the primary concern was to reduce significantly the threat to Israel of a soon-to-be nuclear-armed Iran. The agreement represented an unambiguous rejection by the world powers of Netanyahu's worldview.⁷⁰⁶

⁷⁰⁴ The agreement is known in Persian as the *برجام*, or the *برنامه جامع اقدام مشترک* (an acronym that translates to JCPOA). It emerged from a years-long process of negotiations dating back approximately 12 years. The negotiations that eventually led to the JCPOA began with a series of interim agreements beginning in November 2012.

⁷⁰⁵ As a signatory to the NPT, Iran had a legal right to develop "a peaceful" nuclear program.

⁷⁰⁶ Iran's involvement in regional conflicts had already made it a power to be reckoned with in ways that many argued undermined regional stability. While Netanyahu claimed that the Iran Deal would strengthen Iran's military power, it is equally arguable that the deal would strengthen Iran as an economic competitor by opening its economy to global opportunities.

The deal illustrates the clash between a fact-based narrative and Netanyahu's "perfected" threat narrative. Years before the agreement, the world heard reports from U.S. intelligence agencies and the IAEA confirming Iran's insistence that it had long abandoned active pursuit of military applications in its nuclear program. While Iran could develop the capability to produce a bomb, there was no evidence that Iran had ever engaged in nuclear weapons manufacture.⁷⁰⁷ Israel, however, refused to accept this as fact and instead claimed that Iran's acquisition of a nuclear bomb was imminent. Israel also refused to believe that Iran's replacement of an avowed anti-Semite in favor of a lower-key moderate reformer who professed an interest in engaging with the international community represented a substantive change. By contrast, international leaders believed that the world would be safer if international inspectors could continuously monitor and verify that Iran was not producing a bomb. Thus, they negotiated an agreement in which Iran agreed not to do what it was already not doing, and also to end processing and stockpiling nuclear material, which would have enabled it to produce a nuclear weapon in a shorter period of time, should Iranian leaders decide to do so. The agreement would last for fifteen years, during which any violation by Iran would carry harsh penalties. In exchange, the world powers agreed to return to Iran its funds that had been frozen and, most importantly, to end certain sanctions that prevented Iran's engagement with international commerce.⁷⁰⁸

The threat narrative, by contrast, maintained that Iranian leaders could not be trusted to abide by any agreement, particularly one that was not permanent. Israelis

⁷⁰⁷ To the extent that Iran had ever explored building a nuclear weapon, most expert assessments concluded that they had never progressed beyond exploratory phases and feasibility studies. Few dispute that Iran had acquired the knowledge to construct a weapon. Board of Directors, 'Final Assessment on Past and Present Outstanding Issues Regarding Iran's Nuclear Programme'.

⁷⁰⁸ 'Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action', 14 July 2015, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/122460/full-text-of-the-iran-nuclear-deal.pdf>.

believed that they and the world were less safe because international leaders were not sufficiently punitive. Not only would Iran continue developing the mythical bomb, it would recover funds that would be used to finance attacks on Israel and other global targets. Their claims that the agreement was “giving” a monetary reward to Iran ignored the fact that the funds legally belonged to the Iranians. Beneath the rhetoric, the major objection was that by negotiating with Iran, world powers normalized the regime that Netanyahu and Israeli leaders had invested in undermining.

No one disputed that Iran would continue to engage in regional conflicts. The agreement did not require that the country move to the sidelines of those conflicts in which it was a presence. The Middle East remained a complicated and hostile region, in which there were many players. Iran supported Hezbollah in Lebanon, along with Shia insurgents and militias in Yemen and Iraq. In Syria, Iran and Russia were both supporting the Assad regime, while the United States sent assistance to rebel groups engaged in that bloody civil war. Yet both Iran and the United States were nominally fighting against a shared enemy in Al Qaeda. For its part, Israel targeted Iran and its proxies, who did not refrain from provoking Israel. Thus, the waxing and waning of the potential for a hot war between the two nations was not alleviated by the Iran deal. The dangers associated with these confrontations, however, involved potential conventional military engagements, as well as the menace of terrorist attacks, which posed a significantly lower risk to Israel’s security and continued existence than nuclear war.⁷⁰⁹

⁷⁰⁹Admittedly, Netanyahu invoked the comparison between terrorism and nuclear threats to support focusing on the Iran threat rather than the Palestinians’ discontent. It is possible that Netanyahu believed that Iran’s support of Hezbollah and Assad was more dangerous than the Palestinian unrest, but this is a difference in the degree of risk not in the type of danger, e.g. existential versus conventional. Moreover, in a conventional confrontation, Israel’s military resources would be stronger than those of Iran and Israel would have the backing of the United States. Iran had no equivalent sponsor.

The vehemence of Netanyahu's denunciation of the Iran deal was predictable. Writing soon after the departure of Ahmadinejad as Iran's president, two journalists examined Netanyahu's rhetoric that described the Iranian regime as messianic and apocalyptic. They questioned whether the intentions Netanyahu ascribed to the Iranian leaders amounted to projection of his own leadership ambitions. Expressing skepticism about his sincerity, they predicted the rhetoric would intensify:

[I]t's difficult to tell whether Netanyahu actually believes any of this or is just trying to rally support for Israel's hard-line positions and deflect international attention from the Palestinian question. While we are inclined to view his rhetoric as mostly cynical, his recently-espoused claim that Iranians are not permitted to wear jeans or listen to western music suggests that we can't completely discount sheer ignorance or a Manichaean worldview that can't reconcile blue jeans with his image of the Islamic Republic. In either case, we can probably expect his rhetoric to become increasingly messianic and apocalyptic if and when the possibility of peace between the US and Iran increases.⁷¹⁰

Netanyahu's posture as a lone voice in the international arena did not deter him. He continued to propagate his narrative as truth, embracing his cause as a moral crusade and as his own historic mission. He took his populism global, finding audiences outside of Israel who were receptive to his attacks on world leaders. Netanyahu repeatedly directed his narrative at international Jewry,⁷¹¹ and found adherents among conservative American politicians, especially those who opposed any policy favored by

⁷¹⁰ Jim Lobe & Daniel Luban, *The Messianic, Apocalyptic Bibi Netanyahu*, lobelog.com (Oct 9, 2013)

⁷¹¹ In particular, Netanyahu sought to inspire support for his position from the supposedly non-partisan but politically active American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) as well as the public affairs committees of the America's Jewish Federations. He also enlisted several hawkish American think tanks, including the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, as well as far-right organizations such as the Gatestone Institute.

President Barak Obama,⁷¹² as well as those who pandered to Jewish voters or wealthy donors, or both.⁷¹³

With Jews in the Diaspora, Netanyahu manipulated feelings of guilt to intensify the message of fear in his standard narrative. He suggested that for choosing not to live in Israel, Jews in western nations, most notably American Jews, owed Israel an allegiance that required them to subordinate their own personal political preferences to Israel's security needs. He urged them to lobby their government officials and cast their votes accordingly. Ironically, while the majority of American Jews did not follow Netanyahu's lead,⁷¹⁴ American domestic policies enabled him to recruit supporters

⁷¹² Many Republican legislators opposed Obama initiatives regardless of content. Led by Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, they announced a strategy of opposition at the beginning of his first term, and few waived. Thus, blocking the Iran Deal may have been based upon political considerations rather than substantive analysis of the issues. Moreover, for many U.S. legislators, their position on the Iran Deal had few political consequences as it was not a decisive issue for their constituents. In the end, Republican Senators failed to secure the votes to reject the Iran Deal. The measure required a super majority of 60 votes in the 100-member body; it fell four votes short. Democratic Senators, however, did not have sufficient votes to ratify the agreement, which meant that the JCPOA was not considered an official treaty. Thus, a future President could withdraw America from participation. In May 2018 Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the JCPOA and re-impose sanctions on Iran. Since there was no evidence that Iran had failed to comply with its terms, and European signatories urged him not to do so, it is likely that he based his decision on political or egotistical calculations.

⁷¹³ For example, New Jersey Democrat Bob Menendez continually emphasized his opposition to the deal to Jewish constituents. Menendez, who was under indictment on federal corruption charges, faced reelection in 2018. He likely believed that wealthy Jewish donors would overlook financial impropriety in favor of a strong Israel advocate. He also sought the support of voters whose single issue was Israel, although the majority of American Jews are not single-issue voters. Seventy percent voted for President Obama's reelection in 2012 despite Netanyahu's obvious support for his Republican challenger. In 2016, 70% voted for Hillary Clinton, although her opponent promised to relocate the American Embassy to Jerusalem, a move long sought by Israelis. He also promised to "tear up" the Iran Deal. Judy Maltz, 'Clinton Won Overwhelming Majority of Jewish-American Vote, Polls Say', *Haaretz*, 9 November 2016, <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/clinton-won-majority-of-jewish-american-vote-polls-say-1.5459522>.

⁷¹⁴ Netanyahu's threat narrative was not overwhelmingly resonant with ordinary American Jews. Polls varied, not surprisingly based upon who conducted them. A poll for a Jewish political action committee, J Street, which favored the agreement, found that

among anti-Obama Republicans. Having made no secret of his dislike for the American President, Netanyahu could make common cause with Republicans' political objectives as well as their generally hawkish positions. Even where his Jewish identity may have been problematic, Netanyahu was strategically adept at recruiting allies among the enemies of his enemies. He also provided the emotional message to politicians seeking support from wealthy Jewish donors, enabling them to attach themselves to his message and adapt the Israeli security narrative as they courted Jewish money and votes. As a cynical politician, Netanyahu knew that his address to Congress in 2015, at the invitation of the Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, would not sit well with President Obama. By denouncing Iran and the President's willingness to negotiate with, rather than directly confront, his enemies, Netanyahu demonstrated that, like many of the legislators he was addressing, he was not willing to compromise on his political ambition even if his position arguably undermined Israel's security.

Fortunately for Netanyahu, in 2016 America elected an unapologetic right-wing populist as its president, who campaigned on a platform of undoing President Obama's achievements, including the Iran Deal. With no experience in foreign policy, government

60% of Jews questioned supported the agreement. A poll conducted for the American Jewish Committee found only a narrow favorability of 50.6% to 47.2%. A Quinnipiac poll of New York City Jewish voters reported that only 33% supported the agreement while 53% opposed it, with 51% agreeing that the world will be less safe. The same poll found that New York City voters opposed the agreement by 43% against to 36% in favor. In contrast, a Public Policy Polling survey of New York City voters found that 58% of voters supported the agreement and 35% opposed it. 'J Street National Survey', 2015 Iran Polling (J Street, 28 July 2015), J Street Polling, https://s3.amazonaws.com/s3.jstreet.org/images/J_Street_Iran_Deal_Poll_Topline_Final_Results_715.pdf; 'Jews Back Iran Deal by Narrow Margin, Poll Says', *The Forward*, 11 September 2015, <https://forward.com/news/breaking-news/320816/jews-back-iran-deal-by-narrow-margin-poll-says/>; Maurice Carroll, 'New York City Voters Oppose Iran Nuclear Pact, Quinnipiac University Poll Finds' (Quinnipiac University, 11 August 2015), https://poll.qu.edu/images/polling/nyc/nyc08112015_Nd74njf.pdf; Julian Hattem, 'Dem Poll Finds Broad Support for Iran Deal', *The Hill*, 27 July 2015, <http://thehill.com/policy/national-security/249244-poll-commissioned-by-dems-finds-broad-support-for-iran-deal>.)

service, or international diplomacy, and no meaningful knowledge of Middle East politics, Donald Trump's policy decisions were personal and self-promotional. Having received financial support from wealthy right-wing Jewish donors, the new President inclined toward support of their causes. He selected his policy advisors based upon his assessment of their loyalty to him and evinced his openness to flattery, including from foreign leaders such as Netanyahu and the Saudi Arabian royal family. Unlike Netanyahu, Trump was not a believer in a consistent situational narrative, but like Netanyahu, he embraced the populist style and tactics to secure support for his self-promotional policies.⁷¹⁵

Netanyahu could work with and on President Trump to assist him in following through on his campaign pledge to end the nuclear agreement.⁷¹⁶ He undoubtedly recognized that if Israel, with little international leverage, secured an alliance with the world's most powerful nation, it would not rest upon legal justification or power politics. Iran had not violated any of the terms of the JCPOA – international inspectors had consistently verified Iran's full compliance with the deal – nor had it given its negotiating partners reason to suspect it would fail to fulfill the agreement's terms. Rather, the United States would need to claim that the Iran Deal was flawed and ignore concerns about how a renunciation might damage American credibility. President Trump needed a narrative that not only represented his action as something more than merely a reversal of an accomplishment of his predecessor but also would justify his repudiation

⁷¹⁵ While Netanyahu used populist strategy to garner support for his foreign policy agenda, he also appeared to mirror Trump in adopting domestic measures, including attacks on the press, suppression of non-governmental organizations, and attempts to discredit corruption probes by law enforcement authorities. See also, Jonathan G. Leslie, 'Netanyahu's Populism: An Overlooked Explanation for Israeli Foreign Policy', *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 37, no. 1 (12 October 2017): 75–82.

⁷¹⁶ President Trump also moved the American Embassy to Jerusalem and recognized Jerusalem as the official capital of the State of Israel, longtime goals of Netanyahu.

of the European powers who participated in the negotiations. Populism provided Trump with his strategy: He could ignore the concerns of those, including world leaders, who were not among his supporters, and he could devise reasons acceptable to his base regardless of the truth of his claims.

As Trump had demonstrated repeatedly both during the campaign and in the early months of his presidency, his Republican base expected neither coherency nor consistency in his policy pronouncements. Hence, Netanyahu could facilitate Trump's crafting of a narrative. Having successfully securitized the Iranian issue, Netanyahu never wavered from his declaration that Iran was an existential threat. He could help Trump ignore the results of the 2017 Iranian presidential elections, in which voters rejected the conservative candidates in favor of reelecting the moderate Rouhani. Significantly, although Iranians reported their disappointment that the JCPOA had not brought the expected economic benefits, they nevertheless decisively expressed their hope that the deal negotiated by Rouhani would improve their lives.⁷¹⁷ The contrast between the Iranians' optimism for their future and the pessimistic messages Israelis were hearing from their leaders could not have been sharper. Likewise, Netanyahu's portrait of Iran could not have been further from reality and still maintain a patina of plausibility.

Remarkably, Trump followed Netanyahu's lead.⁷¹⁸

⁷¹⁷ Rouhani won decisively in the first round of balloting, receiving 57% of the vote in an election with a 73.3% turnout. The runner-up, conservative cleric Ibrahim Raisi, received only 38% of the vote even after the other main conservative candidate, Tehran Mayor Mohamad Baqer Qalibaf, withdrew and endorsed Raisi in the week before the election, seeking to defeat Rouhani. 'Iran's Rouhani Wins Decisive Re-Election', *BBC News*, 20 May 2017, sec. Middle East, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-39984066>.

⁷¹⁸ Trump rejected the personal entreaties of the French and German heads of State, who personally visited him before a JCPOA recertification deadline. They failed to convince Trump to honor America's commitment either to the Deal or to its international allies. Despite any evidence of Iran's non-compliance, Trump refused to certify compliance, effectively ending U.S. participation.

As I conclude this project, Netanyahu is poised to achieve his short-term objectives of disrupting, if not ending, the Iran Deal and of engaging Iran in at least a warlike confrontation, if not an actual war. Events during the week of April 22, 2018 illustrate the complexities associated with Netanyahu's strategy. During that week, three foreign interests with a stake in the American President's decision on the Iran Deal – a European President, the Iranian Foreign Minister, and the Israeli Defense Minister – each visited the United States to argue their case prior to the deadline for the decision.

In his high profile official state visit, French President Emmanuel Macron reportedly sought to a way to “save” the Iran Deal.⁷¹⁹ The countries of Europe and the European Union very much wanted to preserve the agreement, not only to promote stability in the Middle East, but also to realize the economic benefits it promised to European companies.⁷²⁰ In addressing Trump's opposition, Macron and his colleagues recognized that the issue was not Iran's continuing dangerous behavior but rather Trump's egotistical aims of undoing his predecessor's achievement and possibly claiming credit for a hypothetical better deal. They appeared willing to deal on his terms. In the end, Macron did not succeed in convincing Trump not to abandon the JCPOA.⁷²¹ The European Union is still trying try to salvage a deal with Iran on its own. It remains an open question whether Iran can realize any economic benefits for continued compliance

⁷¹⁹ Ishaan Tharoor, 'Can Macron Save the Iran Deal?' *Washington Post*, 25 April 2018, sec. WorldViews: Analysis.

⁷²⁰ Jonathan Leslie, Reza Marashi, and Trita Parsi, 'Losing Billions: The Cost of Iran Sanctions to the U.S. Economy' (National Iranian American Council, July 2014), <https://www.niacouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Losing-Billions-The-Cost-of-Iran-Sanctions.pdf>.

⁷²¹ Macron realized the impossibility of this almost immediately after his visit, telling reporters just before leaving the United States that he believed he had failed to convince Trump not to walk away. William Dobson, 'Macron Doesn't Believe He Changed Trump's Mind On The Iran Deal', NPR.org, 25 April 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/04/25/605904232/macron-doesnt-believe-he-changed-trump-s-mind-on-the-iran-deal>.

given the reach of United States sanctions.⁷²² A more challenging question is what to expect from Iran if the JCPOA collapses. Might Iran feel compelled to resume its nuclear development or intensify its weapons development program? Might it even consider reviving its long-dormant nuclear weapons initiatives? Would any of these moves initiate a scramble among Middle East nations for acquisition of nuclear weaponry? If such proliferation eventually destabilizes the region, Netanyahu will have finally succeeded in constructing a stronger factual basis for the fear and insecurity he has promoted among Israelis and those concerned about his nation's continued existence.

In the second visit, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif visited New York and undertook a whirlwind tour of the think tank and media circuits ahead of a planned meeting at the United Nations. In his public appearances, Zarif made it clear that, should the United States withdraw from the deal, Iran would likely reciprocate. "There won't be any deal for Iran to stay in," Zarif told the Associated Press.⁷²³ With little actual leverage, however, Zarif and other Iranian officials hinted at dangers resulting from a U.S. withdrawal, which echoed the Netanyahu narrative. Thus, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani warned of "severe consequences," and Ali Shamkhani, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, suggested that Iran might also consider withdrawing

⁷²² Soon after leaving the agreement, U.S. officials began discussing the possibility of levying secondary sanctions on European companies should they engage economically with Iran. 'Background Briefing on President Trump's Decision To Withdraw From the JCPOA' (U.S. Department of State, 8 May 2018), U.S. Department of State Press Releases, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/05/281959.htm>; Steven Erlanger and Milan Schreuer, 'Europe Asks U.S. for an Exemption From Sanctions on Iran', *The New York Times*, 9 June 2018, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/06/world/europe/iran-europe-us-sanctions.html>.

⁷²³ Josh Lederman and Edith Lederer, 'Trump, Top Iran Diplomat Trade Threats as US Decision Nears', *AP News*, 24 April 2018, <https://apnews.com/746693a068ec408784861a7e3024ae38/AP-Interview:-Iran-says-if-US-exits-deal,-it-likely-will-too>.

from the NPT.⁷²⁴ Shamkhani's comment was a subtle reminder that Iran, and not Israel, was a signatory to the international agreement not to build nuclear weapons. Both men left open the meaning and potential impact of their warnings.

The visit that received the least attention was that of Israel Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman, who met with several high-ranking Trump administration officials. Among the most hawkish members of Netanyahu's cabinet, Liberman called the Iran Deal an "attempt to avoid reality," claiming, without evidence, that it had done nothing to moderate Iranian behavior.⁷²⁵ Liberman, who had long preferred military action over diplomacy,⁷²⁶ likely received a sympathetic hearing from President Trump's new national Security Advisor John Bolton,⁷²⁷ and at least a cordial one from Secretary of Defense James Mattis. Both men shared hawkish views on Iran and were concerned about that country's regional conduct, including its "hegemonic" pursuits. Bolton, having publicly called for direct military action against Iran,⁷²⁸ shared Israel's hope that America could assist in armed conflict that would achieve regime change. It is

⁷²⁴ 'Iran to Trump: Stay in Nuclear Deal or "Face Severe Consequences"', Al Jazeera, 24 April 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/iran-trump-stay-nuclear-deal-face-severe-consequences-180424073800698.html>.

⁷²⁵ Times of Israel Staff and AP, 'Liberman: In Future War, Lebanon Will "Pay Full Price" for Iran Ties', *The Times of Israel*, 31 January 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/liberman-in-future-war-lebanon-will-pay-full-price-for-iran-ties/>.

⁷²⁶ JPost.com Staff, 'Avigdor Liberman: Iran Nuclear Deal Yielding Similar Results to North Korea Deal', *Jerusalem Post*, 19 February 2017, <https://www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/Liberman-Iran-nuclear-deal-yielding-similar-results-to-North-Korea-deal-481973>.

⁷²⁷ In this meeting, Liberman presented the presidential advisor with a painting depicting Bolton tearing up a copy of the 1975 UN Resolution 3379 that equated Zionism with racism. As the United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Bolton had worked to abolish that resolution. Arutz Sheva Staff and AFP, 'Liberman Meets with John Bolton, Jared Kushner', Arutz Sheva, 26 April 2018, [http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/245043.tearing up a UN resolution](http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/245043.tearing%20up%20a%20UN%20resolution)

⁷²⁸ John R. Bolton, 'To Stop Iran's Bomb, Bomb Iran', *The New York Times*, 26 March 2015, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/26/opinion/to-stop-irans-bomb-bomb-iran.html>.

questionable whether these men considered any of the potential intended or unintended consequences of their preferred outcomes. Given the experiences of both the United States and Israel in their recent military engagements, there are plenty of reasons to fear the consequences.

Remarkably, while Netanyahu's commitment to his threat narrative inspired Israel's advocacy of the current direction of events, his narrative has been largely marginal to the considerations of other participants. Few have argued that ending Iran's suspension of its nuclear development program makes the world safer. At the same time, however, we can trace the origin of the present tension to the durability and resonance of Iran as an existential threat. Moreover, the public reporting, whether speaking approvingly or critically of abandoning the agreement, echoes the Israeli threat narrative by focusing on the danger of Iranian bomb-making despite all the evidence suggesting this had not been Iran's objective at the time the agreement was signed. It is notable that the public's understanding of the case for abandoning the Iran Deal, as well as the future risks of doing so, is confused and uncertain. It is this uncertainty rather than Netanyahu's current narrative that intensifies the fear of all concerned for the future of the region.

There is reason to suspect that neither Netanyahu nor Trump is acutely interested in Iran's nuclear program as much as they are in destabilizing Iran. The failure of Iran's elected government to meet the economic expectations of its population promised by the JCPOA opens the door to more hardline factions to capitalize on the discontent. They could move to marginalize the existing government, or they might seek to concentrate more power in the hands of hardline and conservative factions. These efforts may result in an Iranian government that is in fact militantly hostile to the

Western world and the “Zionist regime.” Such developments might make regime change a more compelling and realistic option for Iran’s opponents.

In the confusion and maneuvering generated by the present uncertainty, Netanyahu’s populist securitization of Israeli foreign policy endures. Netanyahu’s threat narrative succeeded in according the fear of a nuclear-armed Iran a prominent place on the world’s action agenda, yet curiously his advocacy against a diplomatic solution did not undermine his or his narrative’s credibility.

It is unquestionable, however, that raising consequential questions regarding the political fate of Iran’s government and its people; possibly initiating a nuclear arms race in the Middle East; and increasing the potential for war between Iran and Israel, with the assistance of the United States, render the future dangerous and unpredictable.

Appendices

Appendix I: Constructivists' Concept of Identity

NOTE: Identity is a concept developed by constructivists and adapted by securitization theorists. Its contribution rests principally in offering an understanding of a national collective that provides a basis for analyzing foreign policy decisions based upon promotion or protection of that identity. Theorists offer different methodologies for defining identity while agreeing that it is a concept important to theoretical analysis. The definitional contestation is not, however, material to this project's use of the securitization lens. I therefore include it in this appendix to offer a complete background for the discussion of identity as applied to Israel's development of the Iran threat narrative and the politics and policies it generated.

Constructivists believe that both individual and collective identities are material to understanding the construction of foreign policy. While their effort to define identity is a significant contribution to the theoretical literature, it also presents the greatest difficulty in applying constructivism as a theory. It is an intuitive proposition that how we see ourselves dictates how we interact with the world. This is what Iver Neumann was affirming when he observed that the value of considering collective identity in the state-based international system is that it gives "ontological status to the sundry subjects or 'actors' in world politics."⁷²⁹

It is apparent, however, that the challenge associated with using identity rests in capturing its applicability as a generalizable concept that is universally applicable across the spectrum of international relations situations. There are two definitional challenges. First, what are the metrics for determining identity? Second, what is the process for constructing the collective identity of the state as an actor in the international arena?

As to the first challenge, if the processes for identity formation are not defined, there is nothing to constrain scholars from designing their own metrics to fit their interpretations and reasoning. As a starting point, we are forced to concede that identity

⁷²⁹ Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: The 'East' in European Identity Formation* (Manchester University Press, 1999), 1.

cannot be reduced to a single explanation.⁷³⁰ Scholars have sought to constrain theoretical individualism by defining processes for constructing collective identity. Neumann illustrates the difficulty of this task.⁷³¹ He cites a plethora of theorists, including Schmitt, Nietzsche, Bakhtin, Foucault, Said, and Marx, in a sprawling work seeking to arrive at an acceptable definition of identity. His exegesis is enlightening, but he fails to achieve his goal, admitting that the issue is too complex to allow universal simplification.⁷³² Thus, he articulates his preference for a custom-built approach to identity creation and the study of collective identity, one that enables and maintains flexibility and avoids the trap of ideological orthodoxy in describing identity.

Such ambiguity is frustrating, but Neumann demonstrates that it is necessary since it captures the reality that the building blocks of identity often shift both geographically and temporally. This is the case when analyzing actions by Middle East actors, where religion, which is itself a social construction, is a crucial component of individual and collective identity. In countries ruled by clerics, religion can dictate behavior. Religious leaders forge a polity that will expect and support policies based upon theological interpretations. By contrast, a multi-ethnic state may encounter internal conflicts when publics hold differing religiously-based values and thus expect different standards of officials' behavior. When countries are comprised of populations with different belief systems, the struggle of collectives of believers for domination of national identity can produce internal conflict. By contrast, in nations embracing a

⁷³⁰ Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett concede this point in the introduction to their volume on the relationship between identity and foreign policy in the Middle East, admitting the unlikelihood of finding a "monocausal explanation of state or national identity formation" or a "single master variable operating in any one case." Shibley Z. Telhami and Michael Barnett, eds., *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 13.

⁷³¹ These include the ethnographic, psychological, continental philosophical, and what he calls the "Eastern exclusion" methods. Neumann, *Uses of the Other*.

⁷³² Neumann, 163.

separation of church and state, leaders may eschew religion in asserting their own and their nation's identity in favor of other policy motivations. In such a secular state, if a political leader unexpectedly seeks to embrace religion as the national identity, he may succeed in building a power base among those who share such a goal. Thus, the assertion of religion as a feature of collective identity in a modern political world highlights the dynamic nature of the construction process. An identity grounded in history can be reinterpreted to adapt to changing conditions. Exogenous political developments can also modify religious beliefs and practices, which in turn modify identity perceptions. This struggle has been part of both Iranian and Israeli politics.

Treating the identity construction process as dynamic requires accounting for time and location. Formation and modification of identity adapts to internal and external stimuli. In this way, it resembles a living organism that exists in a state of constant temporal motion. No one disputes that as a person moves through life, her identity changes, sometimes dramatically, in response to events both within and beyond her control. A single woman in her early 20s will have a different conception of the self than she will at age 45 if she is married with children. Similarly, the collective identity of a nation does not remain constant throughout its history. Edward Said advises that the researcher should "regard society as the locale in which a continuous contest between adherents of different ideas about what constitutes the national identity is taking place."⁷³³ For example, consider the forging of identity during the foundational period of the State of Israel. For some, the violence that followed Israel's declaration of statehood represented a continuation of Jewish persecution in a hostile world. At the same time, Israel as a homeland for the European Jews displaced by the Holocaust represented the

⁷³³ Said, 'The Phony Islamic Threat', 62 via Telhami and Barnett, *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, 6.

fulfillment of a biblical promise. These ideas resonated with supporters in the Diaspora. Some of the state's founding leaders, notably David Ben Gurion and Max Nordau, offered a different identity and embraced a different narrative. For them, the new Israel embodied what they called "muscular Judaism," in which the Israeli people were not history's victims.⁷³⁴ In this telling, Jews were pioneers engaged in labor-intensive activities, excelling in martial prowess as well as in athletic pursuits. They sought to de-emphasize the memory of the Holocaust, which they feared portrayed them as helpless victims of evil actors.⁷³⁵ These contrasting self-perceptions animated the debates over collective identity and the foreign policy decisions they generated.

Constructivists' response to the challenge of narrowing and generalizing the components of identity formation is to focus on the process for collective identity formation. Here they explain that this process operates in two ways: horizontally, involving distinguishing members' characteristics from those of outsiders, and vertically, referring to the indigenous source of the collective's characteristics. They further distinguish the vertical process either as initiated from top-down by elite actors or as the result of a bottom-up organic movement wherein a community's defining characteristics are diffused to a national polity.

The horizontal construction originates in distinguishing the collective self from the other.⁷³⁶ It is a process of inclusion by excluding those who are different according

⁷³⁴ Alex von Tunzelmann, *Blood and Sand: Suez, Hungary and the Crisis That Shook the World* (Simon & Schuster UK, 2016).

⁷³⁵ This concept is explored in further detail in Chapter Five.

⁷³⁶ This conception is described in numerous theoretical critiques; I list just a few examples here: Maja Zehfuss, 'Constructivism and Identity: A Dangerous Liaison', *European Journal of International Relations* 7, no. 3 (1 September 2001): 315–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066101007003002>; Bahar Rumelili, 'Constructing Identity and Relating to Difference: Understanding the EU's Mode of Differentiation', *Review of International Studies* 30, no. 1 (1 January 2004): 27–47; Thomas Diez, 'Europe's Others and the Return of Geopolitics', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17, no. 2 (1 July 2004): 319–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0955757042000245924>; William E.

to chosen characteristics. Bukh describes the struggle to establish identity as a kind of “ongoing boundary drawing process’ in which the borders of the ‘self’ are defined and redefined in opposition to difference embodied in a multiplicity of others.”⁷³⁷ In Israel, the debate over foreign policy proposals often reflects competing narratives of how the polity is defined vis-à-vis both its hostile neighbors and its political opponents.

Vertical identity construction focuses on who defines the collective’s identity. Constructivists distinguish between a definitional process dictated by elite members of society and identity formation that emerges from a shared project among individuals within a community. The distinction may have significance, but it may also be true that elite drivers can exploit the organic identity of particular communities in seeking support for their policies. Communities evolve and leaders come and go in response to changing conditions. This makes identity formation a dynamic and iterative process.

Looking at Israeli identity struggles, we see that elites have the means to dictate the terms of historical memory, which is so much a part of the Jewish identity. Yet the state’s founders embraced a version of the Israeli identity that marginalized history. In their effort to suppress the traditional narrative of Jews as victims, they rejected state-sponsorship of public events memorializing the Holocaust; adopted school texts that highlighted Jewish resistance to persecution; and promoted physical activity and sport.⁷³⁸ They emphasized the importance of cultural achievement over religious observance. In so doing, they distinguished the modern Israeli identity they embraced from the historic Jewish identity. Michael Walzer has observed that modern states,

Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*, Expanded Edition (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

⁷³⁷ Bukh, *Japan’s National Identity and Foreign Policy*, 11, citing Zehfuss, ‘Constructivism and Identity’; Neumann, *Uses of the Other*.

⁷³⁸ Ian S. Lustick, ‘The Holocaust in Israeli Political Culture: Four Constructions and Their Consequences’, *Contemporary Jewry* 37, no. 1 (1 April 2017): 129; Tunzelmann, *Blood and Sand*.

including Israel, that have reinterpreted the role of religion in their new society have eventually faced a backlash from the religious communities excluded from the policy making process. This produces political contestation over competing visions of collective identity.⁷³⁹

When religiously-based organizations enter politics professing to recapture the “soul” of their country, they exemplify a bottom-up identity formation process. They seek to convince their fellow citizens to identify with the historical memory and formative experiences that inform their religious-based vision of the shared state. As Rousseau explains this type of identity formation, “Interactions between individuals create a domestic society and...the interaction of domestic societies creates an international society. It is simply impossible to talk about how ‘social facts’ are constructed without referring to the entities that are doing the constructing.”⁷⁴⁰

While the distinction between top-down and bottom-up may be consequential in some contexts, I submit that it is more useful to think of identity construction as simultaneously an individual and group endeavor. Wilhelm Dilthey advocated a middle path when he discussed the idea of a “weight of numbers” in which society exerts a greater influence over the individual than any individual can contribute to society.⁷⁴¹ In this formulation, neither elite actors at the top nor individual citizens at the bottom are primarily responsible for the collective identity. For the individual and her immediate cohort, identity is constructed in “real time” from personal experience and small-scale communal interactions, such as with family, friends, schools, or churches. This accords

⁷³⁹ Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation*.

⁷⁴⁰ Rousseau, *Identifying Threats and Threatening Identities*, 8.

⁷⁴¹ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, ‘Islamic Utopian Romanticism and the Foreign Policy Culture of Iran’, *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 3 (1 October 2005): 269.

with Rousseau's conception.⁷⁴² At the same time, the communities form larger constituencies that often designate leaders, who are or who interact with elites. The cohort of elites exerts influence through its control of communications and state institutions. Officials can promote politics that facilitate or inhibit group insularity. Together the communities and elites select a leader, who articulates a vision of national identity. He can develop a common sense of belonging or a shared unity against those who do not belong, or both.

The leader either explicitly or inferentially embraces a vision of national identity to serve as the basis for his foreign policy decisions. The collective identity is particularly material when selecting allies and enemies.⁷⁴³ In defining the collective, the leader may consciously or unconsciously consider his own persona, most especially his beliefs and ambitions. Constructivism, while recognizing the role of individual and collective identity, has thus far been unable to generalize the variables material to identity formation. A consequence of this ambiguity is to make it easier for critics to dismiss the explanatory capacity of constructivism as a workable theory.

One "solution" is to limit the circumstances in which identity-based constructivism may prove useful in analyzing decisions regarding a particular set of events or actions. If we accept that identity formation is dynamic and emerges from both vertical and horizontal processes – involving both the forging of collective identity of the state as well as defining self-identity with reference to an external other – we can locate situations in which identity theory can be most helpful.

⁷⁴² Rousseau, *Identifying Threats and Threatening Identities*, 5.

⁷⁴³ In his 1932 work *The Concept of the Political*, the German philosopher Carl Schmitt outlined what he termed the "friend-enemy" distinction. Schmitt was, by most interpretations, an arch realist, and he made sure to note that the terms were only meant to be "understood in their concrete and existential sense, not as metaphors or symbols," or as "a psychological expression of private emotions and tendencies." Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 27–28.

Appendix II: Israel's Narrative Omission – Stuxnet and Assassinations

Israeli leaders' objective of securitization of the nuclear threat involved construction of a narrative to secure domestic and international support for extraordinary action against Iran. At a minimum they envisioned crippling Iran's capacity to enrich fuel required to construct nuclear weapons.⁷⁴⁴ As the Israeli public accepted the Iran threat, their leaders advanced options for military intervention ranging from destruction of Iran's nuclear facilities to regime change. Yet at the same time, not only was the international community unmoved by Israel's justification for extraordinary action but national leaders began exploring diplomatic engagement toward reducing the perceived threat of a nuclear Iran.

Ironically, it appears that Israel secretly engaged in extraordinary actions prior to achieving securitization. Given the secrecy and the mystery associated with its efforts to launch a cyber-attack on the computers controlling Iran's nuclear reactors and to assassinate two Iranian nuclear scientists, we can only speculate as to the strategic objectives. While Israel never admitted culpability in either action, it publicly acknowledged that the deployment of a computer virus to disable computer control

⁷⁴⁴ Preemptive attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities were a frequent topic of conversation among Israeli politicians and security officials. Prime Minister Menachem Begin's decision to launch a preemptive attack against the Iraqi Osirak reactor in 1981 established a precedent for such action. Another attack on a Syrian nuclear facility in 2007 later reinforced this doctrine. Occasionally, Israeli fighter aircraft engaged in military exercises to simulate potential long-bombing runs against distant targets, which were clearly meant to symbolize Iran facilities. Judah Ari Gross, 'With No Landings, Israeli Jets Train for Long-Range Missions in Greece', *The Times of Israel*, 11 June 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/with-no-landings-israeli-jets-train-for-long-range-missions-in-greece/>.

could be considered an act of war.⁷⁴⁵ As Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor explained, “It is a new battleground, if you like, not with guns but with something else.”⁷⁴⁶

In the long run, the actions appear not to have significantly affected Iran’s nuclear development capacity. We cannot know whether Israel expected to fatally cripple Iran’s program or to delay its development so that it could recruit support for more aggressive intervention. Moreover, we have no clues as to the planners’ contingency and follow-up plans. One imagines that the failure to destroy Iran’s nuclear capability could provide justification for more militaristic measures at some point in the future. Success, too, could have incentivized further efforts to achieve regime change.

As it happened, however, neither the attacks nor the assassinations became part of the Iran threat narrative and no national leader never admitted responsibility.⁷⁴⁷ The details remain shrouded in mystery, although Israel has provided some hints of its participation. At the same time, there are strategic reasons why Iran’s leaders were reluctant to credit Israel with a successful intervention. Nevertheless, since these actions

⁷⁴⁵ The action caused significant collateral damage. Estimates are that Iran suffered about 60% of the total damage. The reach of the malware was worldwide, also infecting computers operating in Indonesia, India, Azerbaijan, the United States, and Pakistan, among others. Jarrad Shearer, ‘W32.Stuxnet | Symantec’, Symantec Security Center, n.d., <https://www.symantec.com/security-center/writeup/2010-071400-3123-99>.

⁷⁴⁶ Dan Williams, ‘Israeli Official Sees Cyber Alternative to “Ugly” War’, *Reuters*, 3 February 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-israel-cyber/israeli-official-sees-cyber-alternative-to-ugly-war-idUSTRE71259U20110203>.

⁷⁴⁷ It is widely assumed that the United States worked with Israel to build and deploy the virus. In 2012, David Sanger of the *New York Times* reported on the joint American-Israeli initiative begun under the George W. Bush administration codenamed “Olympic Games” that eventually led to the creation of the Stuxnet virus. Sanger indicated that his report was based on interviews with “current and former American, European, and Israeli officials,” but none were willing to comment on the record due to the classified nature of the materials they were discussing. There has never been any official declaration of responsibility from Israeli or American officials. David E. Sanger, ‘Obama Ordered Wave of Cyberattacks Against Iran’, *The New York Times*, 1 June 2012, sec. Middle East, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/01/world/middleeast/obama-ordered-wave-of-cyberattacks-against-iran.html>.

are part of the historical account of the enmity between Israel and Iran, they merit mention in this appendix.

It is probable that in 2009, Israel, in collaboration with the United States, launched what has subsequently been described as “the first digital weapon of geopolitical importance.”⁷⁴⁸ The cyber weapon took the form of an unprecedented malicious software worm that physically destroyed the equipment it infected.⁷⁴⁹ According to reports, the first attack occurred a few months after Netanyahu assumed the office of prime minister for the second time. The “weapon,” however, had taken years to develop.⁷⁵⁰ Some speculate that the idea for a cyberwar project began in the late 1990s, which would have coincided with Netanyahu’s first term as Israel’s leader.⁷⁵¹ Reportedly, Mossad Chief Meir Dagan oversaw the development of the cyber weapon, which became known as “Stuxnet.” He later publicly explained that he did not favor conventional war with Iran, telling reporters that a military strike on Iran would not stop its nuclear development program.⁷⁵² By the time of Dagan’s observation, the world knew of the Stuxnet attack, and most suspected the Israelis’ involvement.⁷⁵³

⁷⁴⁸ Holger Stark, ‘Mossad’s Miracle Weapon: Stuxnet Virus Opens New Era of Cyber War’, *Spiegel Online*, 8 August 2011, sec. International, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/mossad-s-miracle-weapon-stuxnet-virus-opens-new-era-of-cyber-war-a-778912.html>.

⁷⁴⁹ Zetter, *Countdown to Zero Day*.

⁷⁵⁰ The 2009 attacks may not have been the only actions Israel planned against Iran. Reporter James Risen writes that Israel also attempted to develop a plot to attack Iran’s power grid. James Risen, *State of War: The Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

⁷⁵¹ By many accounts the development of the actual Stuxnet virus probably began around 2005-2006, though no exact date has ever been revealed. Dan Williams, ‘ANALYSIS-Wary of Naked Force, Israelis Eye Cyberwar on Iran’, *Reuters*, 7 July 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSLV83872>.

⁷⁵² Dagan gave this interview on the final day of his seven-year service as head of Israel’s foreign intelligence service. Williams.

⁷⁵³ Public discussion of the attack began in 2010 when a security firm in Belarus was called in to investigate computers in Iran that were repeatedly crashing and rebooting themselves. Although the virus targeted the computers at Iran’s nuclear plant, it soon spread to other parts of the world. Zetter, *Countdown to Zero Day*.

In 2011, on the same day as Dagan's public statement upon his retirement as head of the Mossad, unknown assailants attempted to assassinate two Iranian nuclear scientists. One killed Majid Shahriari, a professor of nuclear physics at Shahid Beheshti University, and the other wounded Fereydoon Abbasi, a nuclear physicist. Both attacks used the same method: "sticky bombs" attached to the doors of the scientists' cars by assassins on motorcycles while the cars were stuck in Tehran traffic. Israel did not claim credit for the attacks, although Dagan was an advocate of political assassination of Israel's enemies.⁷⁵⁴ Iran's President Ahmadinejad was quick to blame the Israelis and referenced the Stuxnet virus in his remarks, although he downplayed the consequences of the computer attack for Iran's nuclear progress.

The Stuxnet virus targeted Iran's nuclear facility at Natanz with the intent of causing the self-destruction of uranium-enriching centrifuges that could theoretically be used to manufacture weapons-grade material for use in an atomic bomb. Initially, it was not apparent that the damage had been induced by an outside source. In the end, the extent of the damage inflicted by the worm on Iran's program is debatable. Iran was reluctant to admit it had been attacked, and once it did so, it minimized the impact on its nuclear program.⁷⁵⁵ Iranian officials, however, agreed with its putative attackers that this action amounted to an act of war. Despite the danger inherent in this extraordinary

⁷⁵⁴ Stories later emerged about Israeli intelligence intimidation tactics used against Iranian scientists ahead of the assassination attempts. These included methods such as the delivery of flower bouquets to scientists' families with condolence notes for the scientists who were still alive, as well as video recordings in Persian featuring fake news reports announcing the deaths of the scientists. 'How West Infiltrated Iran's Nuclear Program, Ex-Top Nuclear Official Explains', March 8, 2014, Iran's View, 28 March 2014, <http://www.iransview.com/west-infiltrated-irans-nuclear-program-ex-top-nuclear-official-explains/1451/>.(Iran's View post)

⁷⁵⁵ Alexis C. Madrigal, 'Ahmadinejad Publicly Acknowledges Stuxnet Disrupted Iranian Centrifuges', *The Atlantic*, 29 November 2010, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2010/11/ahmadinejad-publicly-acknowledges-stuxnet-disrupted-iranian-centrifuges/67155/>.

action, the recriminations and the debates over its immediate impact and future consequences remained largely confined to security personnel, computer experts, and technology writers of the world press. Significantly, while a consensus emerged that Israel was involved and Israeli officials publicly embraced the strategy as a method for delaying Iran's deployment of a bomb, few discussed Iran's claim that it was not engaged in building a weapon, a claim supported by both United States and Israeli intelligence reports.⁷⁵⁶

The principals, namely the leaders of Iran and Israel, did not materially alter their messages following the cyberattack. Netanyahu pressed his Iran threat narrative inflamed by Ahmadinejad's antics. Moreover, even after Ahmadinejad left office two years after the discovery of the Stuxnet virus – and his successor floated the idea that Iran might agree to end its nuclear program – Netanyahu did not change his narrative content: Stuxnet and assassinations were not part of the public discussion.

⁷⁵⁶ Curiously, the controversy over the accuracy of the NIE assessments appears to have been treated as an issue separate from the potential danger inherent in Iran's nuclear development program. This is probably due to the fact that Iran retained the capacity to build a weapon whether or not that was the intention of its program at the time or after the NIE. As noted in the main text, Israeli leaders appeared fond of predicting the time at which Iran would have a nuclear weapon. Few ever acknowledged that such deadlines came and went without evidence that a bomb had been produced. One fear implicit in Netanyahu's suspicions of Iran's willingness to negotiate a suspension of its nuclear program is that the nation could not be deprived of the expertise in nuclear technology its scientists had acquired. Netanyahu stressed this point during a presentation in April 2018 in which he presented materials seized during an Israeli commando raid of an alleged Iranian storehouse for nuclear-related documents in Tehran. While the raid produced no evidence showing that Iran had been actively attempting to build a nuclear weapon after 2003, Netanyahu stressed that the documents contained indications that the Iranians had acquired the knowledge of how to complete a bomb should it choose to do so at some point in the future.

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