

Iran's nuclear ambitions and Israel's strategic dilemmas

By MICHAEL RASKA
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

THROUGHOUT the Cold War, Israel was able to prevent nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Its policy of nuclear opacity – never admitting the possession of nuclear weapons, albeit not denying it either – has served as the core of Israel's deterrence.

In 1981, after Israel's annihilation of the Iraqi nuclear reactor Osirak, then Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin proclaimed: "Under no circumstances would we allow the enemy to develop weapons of mass destruction against our nation." Under the so-called "Begin Doctrine", Israel would not allow itself to be the second country to introduce nuclear weapons in the Middle East.

A quarter of a century later, the viability of the Begin Doctrine as much as Israel's entire policy of nuclear opacity is on the verge of another test. For nearly a decade now, Iran has been defying international diplomatic pressures while denying developing nuclear weapons capability. Notwithstanding the contending intelligence assessments on the actual "point of

no return" when Iran would de facto cross a particular technological threshold, the prospect of a nuclear Iran opens the Pandora's Box of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.

From an Israeli perspective, the essence of the Iranian threat is the increasing convergence between radical ideology, long-range missile capability and nuclear weapons. Concerns over Iran's covert efforts to develop its nuclear weapon capability, a claim that Teheran denies, have been amplified by the development of its medium-range ballistic missile programmes, and its open calls for Israel's destruction.

Iranian efforts to develop nuclear capability may have also ignited fears in neighbouring states. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey have announced plans to start civilian nuclear programmes under the auspices of the International Atomic Energy Agency. Some of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have also inked deals with other countries and companies to set up facilities for nuclear energy production. At the end of 2008, for example, the GCC authorised nuclear development for its Gulf members.

More importantly, a nuclear Iran could embolden terrorist groups such as Hizbol-

lah into taking more aggressive action against Israel. The sum of all fears is the possible nexus of two factors – Iran providing a nuclear umbrella to its terror proxies such as Hizbollah and deliberately threatening Israel's destruction.

The question is, what is Israel prepared to do in response?

If Iran does indeed go nuclear, Israel may no longer be able to sustain its policy of nuclear opacity. Israel will have to decide when, how and how much to disclose to maximise its nuclear deterrent.

Its policy-makers will have to consider at least four options or scenarios:

■ Israel maintains a status quo by keeping its nuclear opacity. It could keep its nuclear capabilities and protective efforts undisclosed, albeit not denied either, and continue to signal its willingness and ability to respond to an attack in kind. But this may lower the enemy state's perceptions of Israel's nuclear deterrent, and increase the risks for a preemptive nuclear strike.

■ Israel accepts nuclear parity and shifts to a declaratory status based on Mutually Assured Destruction. The country declares a "launch on warning" strategy, whereby a retaliatory attack is launched on getting warning of an enemy nuclear

strike, as well as second-strike nuclear capability. Israel may switch to an open nuclear posture with multiple options of disclosure.

■ Israel shifts to a minimum credible deterrence in the form of a "no first use" stance and second-strike capability. But assuming that Israel can neither trade space for time nor afford to lose a single city, this option seems unlikely.

■ Israel resorts to an international arms control regime or pursues denuclearisation of the Middle East. Israel may rethink the possibility of negotiating regional arms-control talks and of supporting a Middle East without weapons of mass destruction. This option seems unlikely in the absence of a comprehensive peace with Arab countries and Iran. Furthermore, Iran would have to renounce its nuclear programmes in conjunction with the dismantlement of Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia's chemical and biological weapons programmes.

With Iran going nuclear, Israeli policy-makers will be directed, perhaps more than ever, at preventing Iran or any other neighbouring Arab state from acquiring nuclear weapons. On Sept 6, 2007, Israel conducted a secret precision strike on Syria on what Israeli and US intelligence analysts judged to be a partly constructed nu-

clear facility, apparently modelled on a North Korean design. While intelligence estimates indicated that the Syrian facility was years from completion, the attack showed that Israel was determined to neutralise even a nascent nuclear project in a neighbouring state.

Yet a similar air strike against Iran would be harder. Iran has spread out its nuclear facilities and constructed the bulk of them underground to protect them from conventional air strikes. Israeli strategists must also factor in other risks such as the need to fly over Arab or Turkish airspace and the collateral damage from possible nuclear radiation and contamination of the targeted area. Then there are the upgraded Iranian air defences and the probability of Iranian retaliation such as interference with the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf, counterattacks with conventional ballistic missiles, and mobilisation of terrorist groups like Hizbollah and Hamas.

Based on its threat perceptions and historical experience, Israel may decide that it has no choice but to deny its enemies the capability to develop nuclear weapons. As Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak said, the prevailing lesson from Israel's war experience has been the belief that "ultimately, we (Israel) are standing alone". This belief may well continue to drive Israel's strategic choices.

The writer is a PhD candidate at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.