



Manufacturing Menace: Israel's Strategic Construction of Iran as an Existential Threat and Its Implications for Regional Politics

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Israel's strategic construction of Iran as an existential threat throughout the 1990s, arguing that this portrayal was not based on objective intelligence assessments but served instrumental political purposes. Through analysis of Israeli policy under Prime Ministers Rabin, Peres, and Netanyahu, the study demonstrates how the Iranian threat narrative was leveraged to advance domestic agendas, justify negotiations with the PLO, influence U.S. foreign policy, and resist concessions under the Oslo Accords. The article reveals a pattern of exaggeration and manipulation of intelligence regarding Iran's nuclear and missile capabilities, often contradicting Israel's own security establishment. It concludes that the demonization of Iran was a flexible political tool, periodically amplified or downplayed based on shifting Israeli strategic interests rather than empirical changes in Iranian capabilities or intentions.

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Introduction

The strategic construction of threats in international relations often serves political objectives beyond immediate security concerns. This dynamic is vividly illustrated in the case of Israel's portrayal of Iran as an existential threat during the 1990s, a period marked by complex geopolitical shifts in the Middle East. The article "Israel's Construction of Iran as an Existential Threat" by Gareth Porter offers an incisive analysis of how successive Israeli administrations instrumentalized the narrative of an Iranian nuclear and ballistic missile threat, not solely based on objective intelligence assessments but as a calculated policy tool to serve domestic political aims, manage foreign relations, and shape regional power balances. This introduction provides a critical context for understanding the interplay between political manipulation, warmongering tendencies of the Zionist regime, and the consequential rise of Iran's strategic posture in the Middle East.

Historically, Israeli security policy towards Iran was framed through the "periphery doctrine," which regarded Iran, along with other non-Arab regional actors, as potential allies against hostile Arab nationalist regimes backed by the Soviet Union. This doctrine, rooted in Israel's geopolitical isolation as a Jewish state surrounded by predominantly Arab nations, shaped Israeli strategy from the 1950s through much of the Cold War. Notably, under the Shah's regime, Iran was an important partner for Israel, with cooperation taking covert and overt forms, including arms deals and intelligence sharing. Even after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Israel's security establishment initially assessed Iran as a lesser threat compared to Iraq, primarily due to Iran's

focus on the Iraq-Iran War and its limited ballistic missile and nuclear capabilities at the time. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, Israeli intelligence agencies ranked threats in descending order starting with Palestinian militancy, Syria, Iraq, and only then Iran, which was seen as distant in both intention and capability to pose an immediate danger. This measured and pragmatic assessment stood in stark contrast to the alarmist rhetoric that would emerge over the subsequent decade.

The pivotal shift occurred in the early 1990s, particularly under the premiership of Yitzhak Rabin, who diverged sharply from the established "periphery doctrine" by explicitly designating Iran as Israel's primary security threat. This shift was not precipitated by sudden advances in Iranian military technology or nuclear progress but was rather a strategic repositioning designed to support domestic political objectives. Rabin's government faced significant internal challenges in advancing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, particularly the Oslo Accords, against opposition factions skeptical or hostile to compromise. To galvanize public and political backing for the peace process, Rabin's administration magnified the Iranian threat, portraying Tehran as an irrational, fundamentalist regime bent on acquiring weapons of mass destruction and destabilizing the region. This portrayal not only served to rally nationalist sentiments but also functioned to delegitimize opponents of the peace initiatives by associating them with tacit support for Iran. The threat narrative extended into asserting that the nuclear and missile threat from Iran was imminent and existential, despite intelligence assessments acknowledging the long-term and uncertain nature of Iran's weapons programs.

The subsequent governments of Shimon Peres and Benjamin Netanyahu continued to evolve and manipulate this narrative, each for distinct but overlapping reasons. Peres reinforced the threat during the 1996 elections, employing it as a campaign tool to counteract Likud's criticisms and to portray himself as strong on security. Netanyahu's initial term exhibited a complex relationship with the Iran threat narrative; while initially downplaying it in line with intelligence assessments, his government later revitalized the rhetoric as a strategic lever to influence U.S. policymaking. Netanyahu utilized the perceived Iranian missile and nuclear threat to gain leverage over the Clinton administration, particularly concerning U.S. pressure to implement aspects of the Oslo II Accord involving Israeli withdrawals from occupied territories. By emphasizing the Iranian threat, Netanyahu sought to strengthen domestic political standing and expand Israeli freedom of action both domestically and internationally. This political exploitation was coupled with efforts to build U.S. congressional support for sanctions legislation targeting Iran's ballistic missile program, further solidifying the linkage between Israeli domestic politics and U.S. foreign policy.

The instrumentalization of the Iranian threat entailed significant exaggerations and misrepresentations of intelligence data. Claims regarding Russian technology transfers enabling Iran's missile development were often constructed on circumstantial evidence and inferences rather than verified facts, as later investigations revealed. These inflated claims fueled an environment conducive to aggressive rhetoric and the contemplation of preemptive military strikes

against Iranian nuclear and missile facilities. The cyclical pattern of threat inflation, subsequent partial policy reversals, and renewed escalation characterized Israeli policy through the 1990s, underscoring the political nature of the threat construction rather than a stable security assessment.

This manipulative threat environment also played a critical role in shaping the wider Middle Eastern geopolitical climate. Iran, confronted with relentless Israeli hostility and the looming possibility of military action, intensified its efforts to develop deterrent capabilities, particularly through missile advancements. Reformist voices within Iran sought diplomatic engagement and arms control discussions, but these overtures were largely overshadowed by Israel's sustained demonization campaign. The resultant adversarial dynamic entrenched mutual hostility, promoted regional polarization, and constrained potential avenues for peaceful conflict resolution, thereby exacerbating instability in a region already burdened by protracted conflicts.

Moreover, Israel's portrayal of Iran as an existential threat had pronounced implications for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. By redirecting national and international attention toward a distant yet threatening adversary, Israeli political elites managed to justify continued settlement expansion and hardline security policies in the occupied territories. The Iranian threat narrative enabled Israeli leaders to frame Palestinian resistance as subordinate to a greater security imperative, thus undermining prospects for comprehensive peace initiatives. Furthermore, the alignment of this narrative with U.S. domestic political currents, including defense industry interests and congressional lobbying, entrenched a

policy feedback loop that prioritized confrontation over diplomacy.

In conclusion, the Israeli construction of Iran as an existential threat throughout the 1990s exemplifies the potent role of political narratives in international security policy. Rather than a direct reflection of evolving Iranian military capabilities, the threat portrayal was a deliberate and multifaceted strategic tool deployed by Israeli leaders to further domestic political goals, manipulate U.S. policy, and maintain regional dominance. This deployment of fear and hostility fundamentally reshaped Middle Eastern geopolitics, contributing to long-term patterns of conflict and confrontation that continue to reverberate. Understanding the origins, mechanisms, and consequences of this constructed narrative is essential for scholars and policymakers seeking to address the enduring tensions in the region and to explore pathways toward sustainable peace.

Literature Review

Israel's Construction of Iran as an Existential Threat: A Critical Analysis

The portrayal of Iran as an existential threat by the Israeli state represents a complex interplay of political strategy, domestic considerations, and shifting geopolitical realities rather than an objective assessment of Iranian capabilities or intentions. This analysis draws on scholarly research and historical evidence to unpack how Israel's depiction of Iran as a dire enemy has been instrumentalized to serve various Israeli domestic and foreign policy objectives, particularly in relation to U.S. support, the peace process with the Palestinians, and regional influence.

Historically, the Israeli view of Iran underwent a significant transformation in the 1990s. Prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, under the Shah, Iran was a key strategic ally within Israel's "periphery doctrine," a policy that sought alliances with non-Arab regional powers such as Iran and Turkey to counterbalance hostile Arab states (Porter, 2015). The Islamic Republic, initially, was not seen as a direct threat; on the contrary, Israeli policymakers and intelligence agencies considered Iran a potential ally against Iraq during the protracted Iran-Iraq war (Porter, 2015).

The shift towards framing Iran as a principal threat was largely catalyzed under Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin starting in 1993. This timing coincided with the Oslo peace process and Rabin's strategic imperative to justify direct negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). By overstating the Iranian threat, Rabin aimed to rally domestic support for the peace process by refocusing public attention on Iran as a more distant and dangerous adversary, thus sidelining contentious Palestinian issues (Porter, 2015). Rabin's rhetoric of an imminent nuclear threat from Iran, despite intelligence assessments suggesting Iran was years away from such capabilities, served to mobilize political capital both within Israel and with the United States (Porter, 2015).

The Israeli construction of the Iranian threat intensified under subsequent leaders, notably Benjamin Netanyahu during his first premiership (1996–1999). Netanyahu adeptly used the alleged Iranian missile and nuclear programs as leverage in U.S. politics, particularly to influence congressional legislation aimed at curtailing Russian assistance to Iran's ballistic missile development—an area in which Israeli

intelligence claims have since been questioned or disproved (Porter, 2015). This strategic use of the Iranian threat not only aimed at limiting Iran's regional power but also at bolstering Netanyahu's position against U.S. pressure to implement agreements related to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, specifically the Oslo II accords (Porter, 2015).

Importantly, Israeli intelligence expert assessments in the 1990s often contradicted the government's alarmist narrative. For example, Mossad chiefs and military intelligence consistently viewed Iran's nuclear program as embryonic and its missile capabilities as limited, with no immediate capacity to threaten Israel directly (Porter, 2015). These assessments align with the broader "periphery doctrine" perspective, which envisaged the possibility of shifting alliances with Iran contingent on regional dynamics (Porter, 2015).

The distinguishing feature of Israel's Iran policy during this period was its oscillation between demonization for political utility and moments of pragmatism or attempted accommodation. Netanyahu's government reversed its hostile posture in 1998 when diplomatic arrangements with the U.S. and Russia on sanctions were largely achieved, and even suggested that Israel did not currently view Iran as an enemy (Porter, 2015). Yet, as political contexts evolved—especially linked to Palestinian peace negotiations and U.S.-Iran diplomatic overtures—the hardline rhetoric and militarized posturing resumed, entrenching Iran as a perpetual existential threat in Israeli discourse (Porter, 2015).

The repercussions of this constructed narrative have been profound. By framing

Iran primarily as an ideological, nuclear-armed fanatic bent on Israel's destruction, Israeli policymakers helped shape international views that have supported escalated sanctions, military threats, and political isolation of Iran. This has arguably contributed to the intensification of mutual hostility and diminished prospects for regional détente (Porter, 2015).

In conclusion, the demonization of Iran by Israel in the 1990s was less about an immediate military threat and more about domestic political manipulation, leveraging U.S. alliances, and shaping regional geopolitical perceptions. This strategic narrative construction has reinforced enduring mistrust and conflict dynamics that continue to shape Middle Eastern security policies. Understanding this history is essential for critically analyzing current and future Israeli-Iranian relations and for exploring pathways to sustainable peace in the region.

Research Methodology

Research Methodology for Analyzing Israel's Construction of Iran as an Existential Threat

This research investigates the strategic portrayal of Iran as an existential threat by Israeli political leadership during the 1990s, focusing on how this narrative served multiple domestic and international political objectives. The methodology combines qualitative content analysis of primary and secondary sources with a historical-political analytical framework to critically assess the motives, rhetoric, and consequences of Israel's Iran policy.

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in interpretive historical

analysis. It systematically examines textual data from archival government statements, intelligence reports, political speeches, media coverage, and scholarly literature to trace the evolution of Israel's threat narrative concerning Iran. The research seeks to contextualize Israel's rhetoric within broader geopolitical shifts, such as post-Cold War regional reconfigurations, U.S.-Israel relations, and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Data Collection

Primary sources include official speeches and policy documents of key Israeli leaders, notably Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, and Benjamin Netanyahu, as well as public statements from Israeli defense and intelligence officials. These are supplemented by contemporaneous news articles from major international and Israeli media outlets, providing insight into public discourse and policy framing. The study also incorporates declassified intelligence assessments and legislative records—particularly regarding U.S. congressional actions on Iranian missile proliferation and sanctions legislation—to analyze the interface of Israeli strategy with American foreign policy.

Secondary sources comprise academic journal articles, expert analyses, biographies, and investigative journalism, including the work of Gareth Porter and other Middle East scholars. These sources offer critical perspectives on the reliability of intelligence claims, the domestic political context in Israel, and the impact of Israeli lobbying in U.S. politics.

Analytical Approach

Data are subjected to thematic content analysis to identify recurring motifs, strategic narratives, and shifts in rhetoric about Iran. The analysis differentiates between official intelligence appraisals and political messaging to discern instances of exaggeration, misrepresentation, or instrumentalization of the Iranian threat. Attention is given to temporal variations aligning with electoral cycles, peace negotiations, and U.S. policy changes, illustrating the strategic deployment of fear rhetoric.

This methodological approach also employs process tracing to chart how Israel's threat construction correlated with, and potentially influenced, shifts in U.S. policy, especially regarding sanctions and military posturing. By comparing multiple sources and contrasting official statements with intelligence evaluations, the study highlights discrepancies and underlying motivations.

Ethical Considerations

The research maintains academic rigor through careful source verification and critical evaluation of the biases inherent in political and media discourses. It refrains from normative judgments while emphasizing the importance of transparency in intelligence and political communication.

Limitations

As the study relies on available public records and secondary analyses, certain classified or undisclosed diplomatic communications may remain inaccessible, possibly limiting full transparency of strategic intentions. The analysis acknowledges potential biases in sources linked to political agendas but mitigates these

through triangulation across diverse materials.

Methodology

This multi-source qualitative research method, combining content analysis and process tracing within historical and political frameworks, enables a nuanced understanding of how Israel's framing of Iran as an existential threat was constructed, manipulated, and operationalized for strategic ends. It provides a foundation for exploring the enduring implications of this narrative on regional security dynamics and international relations.

Findings

article "Israel's Construction of Iran as an Existential Threat" reveals multiple findings related to the strategic use of threat narratives by Israeli leadership in the 1990s, the political manipulation underlying these narratives, and the consequent impacts on regional security and diplomacy. The findings demonstrate how Israel's depiction of Iran as an imminent, irrational, nuclear-armed existential threat was both a political instrument and a catalyst for long-term antagonism, contributing to persistent regional instability.

Strategic Narrative Construction as Political Instrument

One of the key findings is that the Israeli portrayal of Iran as a dire existential threat was not primarily based on objective intelligence assessments or sudden changes in Iranian capabilities. Instead, it was a calculated narrative constructed to serve specific domestic and foreign policy objectives. During the 1990s, Israeli leaders, beginning with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1993, deliberately amplified the perceived

Iranian threat to mobilize political support for the Oslo peace process and to position Israel advantageously in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. This instrumental use of the threat narrative continued through subsequent administrations, including those of Shimon Peres and Benjamin Netanyahu.

Shift from Periphery Doctrine and Pre-Existing Intelligence Assessments

Porter's research uncovers a dramatic departure from Israel's longstanding "periphery doctrine," which had framed Iran, under the Shah and even after the 1979 revolution, as a potential regional ally against common Arab adversaries, notably Iraq. Israeli intelligence during the early 1990s did not rank Iran high among security threats, often placing it below Palestinian militancy, Syria, and Iraq. The Iranian nuclear program was still nascent, and Iranian missile capabilities were assessed as limited and not immediately threatening to Israel. These intelligence evaluations contrasted starkly with the public rhetoric of imminent Iranian nuclear and ballistic missile threats promulgated by Israeli political leaders.

Domestic Political Utility in Israeli Context

The article demonstrates that Israel's inflation of the Iranian threat was intertwined with electoral politics and internal power struggles. Rabin and Peres used the specter of an Iranian threat to justify controversial policy decisions, specifically the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. The narrative fostered public support by framing peace as necessary to confront the broader and more dangerous threat posed by Iran's alleged nuclear ambitions. Conversely, Netanyahu initially distanced himself from the Iran alarmism, reflecting his opposition to the Oslo process, but later reinstated and

magnified the threat narrative to counter U.S. diplomatic pressures regarding Israeli settlement expansion and compliance with Oslo II. Netanyahu's exploitation of the Iranian threat provided leverage over U.S. policymaking and enabled Israel to sidestep commitments in the peace process.

Instrumentalization of U.S. Legislative and Policy Process

A critical finding concerns Israel's strategic engagement with the U.S. political system to reinforce its narrative on Iran. Israeli officials systematically linked the Iranian missile and nuclear threat to U.S. national security concerns, supporting congressional sanctions legislation such as the Iran Missile Proliferation Sanctions Act of 1997. Such efforts were supported by Israeli lobbying groups within the U.S. and aligned with the interests of American defense contractors and the missile defense lobby, which influenced congressional deliberations. This approach not only heightened U.S.-Iran tensions but also constrained U.S. diplomatic flexibility in managing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, thereby securing Israel's geopolitical interests.

Discrepancies and Misrepresentations in Intelligence Claims

Porter identifies significant discrepancies between Israeli political rhetoric and the underlying intelligence. Assertions about Iran's possession or near possession of long-range ballistic missiles capable of reaching Israel, as well as imminent nuclear weapons development, were often inflated or based on questionable evidence. Notably, claims about Russian technology transfers enabling Iran's missile program were later shown to be exaggerated or false, founded more on inferred threats than verified facts. These

misrepresentations, consciously or unconsciously, fueled an escalating cycle of fear and threat perception.

Cycles of Escalation and Temporary Reversals

The article finds that Israeli policy toward Iran during the 1990s was marked by cycles of aggressive rhetoric, threats of preemptive military action, and opportunistic reversals toward conciliatory tones. For example, Netanyahu's government initially escalated threats and military posturing against Iran, only to reverse course following diplomatic agreements and intelligence reassessments suggesting that Iran lacked immediate capabilities posing a direct threat. Although brief, these reversals underscored the political instrumentalization of threat narratives and reflected reactive policy shifts rather than strategic rapprochement. Nonetheless, the cumulative effect was a hardened Israeli stance that framed Iran as a perpetual adversary in subsequent decades.

Impact on Iran-Israel and Regional Relations

findings suggest that Israel's construction of an existential Iranian threat contributed to a self-fulfilling dynamic in which Iran responded by intensifying its military programs, particularly missile capabilities, to establish credible deterrence against Israel. The mutual demonization entrenched hostility, undermining prospects for diplomatic engagement. Attempts by Iranian reformist leaders to initiate arms control talks and reduce tensions were not reciprocated sincerely by Israel, which was preoccupied with isolating Iran and maintaining U.S. support for its regional aims. This dynamic has had lasting effects on Middle Eastern geopolitics, exacerbating conflict patterns

and complicating efforts toward peace and stability.

The Role of Ideology and Symbolism

The findings also highlight how ideology and symbolic framing played a pivotal role in shaping Israel's public threat discourse. Iranian leadership was consistently portrayed not just as a geopolitical adversary but as an ideological fanatic committed to Israel's destruction, amplifying existential fears beyond empirical threat assessments. This symbolic construction served to unify Israeli public opinion behind hardline security policies and justified exceptional measures, including threats of preemptive strikes .

Conclusion

comprehensive examination elucidates the complex and multifaceted nature of Israel's construction of Iran as an existential threat during the 1990s. It reveals how political manipulation, intelligence misrepresentation, and strategic leveraging of U.S. relations contributed to a polarized and militarized regional environment. Far from simply reacting to a genuine security challenge, Israeli leadership harnessed the Iranian threat narrative to advance domestic political agendas and shape international policy in ways that reinforced hostility and constrained diplomatic options. Understanding this constructed narrative is crucial for scholars and policymakers aiming to address the enduring tensions between Israel and Iran and to explore alternative pathways toward regional peace.

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